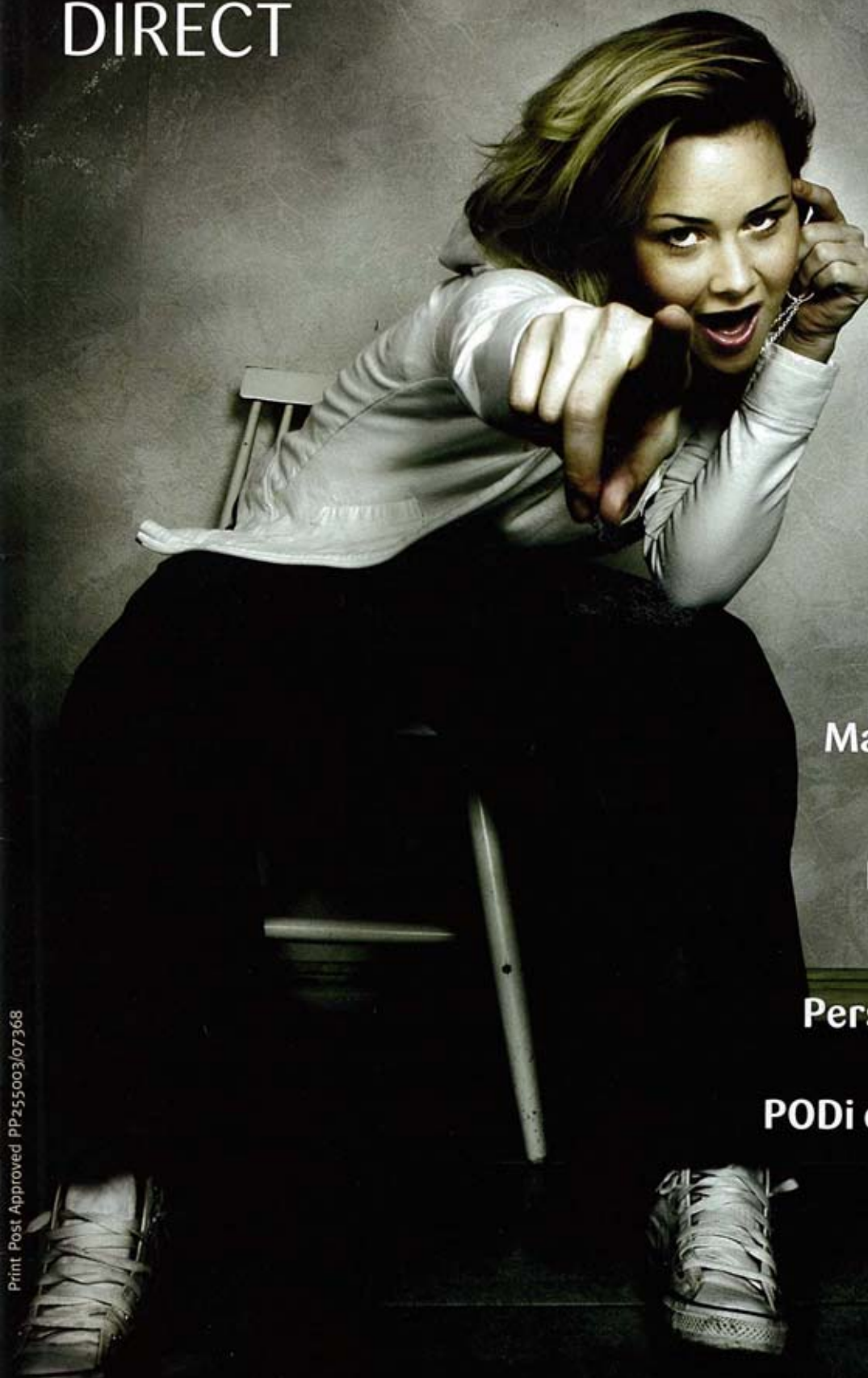


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Print in Direct Marketing

DIRECT



Make the connection

VDP languages
for direct marketing

Personalised URLs

Digital snake oil
or next big thing?

Personal plastic cards

Getting into their wallets

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Respect your customer or pay the price

Print Post Approved PP255003/07368



Make your copy more effective by making it easier to read.

Content may be king, but style also counts. If your style is clumsy, readers will have difficulty decoding your meaning. This article is about *editing*—making good copy better, by making it easier to read.

I urge you to follow the principles of the *Plain English* movement. These can be summed up as follows:

- Use short words
- Use short sentences
- Use short paragraphs
- Use active verbs rather than passive
- Use specifics rather than generalities

The father of Plain English was an Austrian psychologist, Dr. Rudolph Flesch, who moved to New York in the 1940s and studied how the mind processed written language. He worked out a formula to predict how easy a piece of copy will be to read. It's a scale of 1-100, the higher the number, the easier it is to read and understand.

In the 1950s he was joined by J.P. Kincaid on a project for the U.S. Navy to find out the best way to write technical training manuals. They modified Flesch's reading ease score to derive an equivalent US school level for the text, from 1 (first year of primary school) to 12 (last year of high school).

You can set up Microsoft Word to work out the scores for your copy:

1. Click "Tools" on the main menu.
2. Select "Options".
3. Select the tab, "Spelling & Grammar".
4. Select "Show readability statistics".

To check your copy, run "Spelling & Grammar" from the Tools menu. At the conclusion of this check, a message box will appear showing the Flesch Reading Ease score and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. When writing for general adult readers, you should aim for a Flesch score of around 50 or higher, which equates to a Flesch-Kincaid grade level of year 10.

Here's some copy that's typical of ads, mailings and websites:

Security Systems

Each year businesses lose millions of dollars to theft and vandalism, which is not only costly, but can also disrupt the day-to-day operation of any business.

From local neighbourhood shops to large industrial warehouses, Brand

When writing or evaluating copy, most of us jump straight to the issue of content. Does it answer the brief? Does it properly position the product or service? Does it sell?

Security can reduce the risk to your premise. Whether it be a new tailored security solution or simply an upgrade of existing equipment, Brand Security has packages to suit all budgets.

The Brand range of systems are designed to help you safeguard your business. With advanced and reliable technology, and using strategically placed sensors, the 999 Series will have you covered.

This copy requires a lot of effort to read and understand. Here's how to make it shorter and punchier:

ORIGINAL PARAGRAPH 1 1 sentence of 26 words

Each year businesses lose millions of dollars to theft and vandalism, which is not only costly, but can also disrupt the day-to-day operation of any business.

The highlighted the problem areas... *businesses lose millions...* and *...any business...* are impersonal. Good copy is never about any business; it's about just one business—the reader's. Next the phrases, *...which is not only ... but can also...* are a clumsy way to link the financial cost of theft and vandalism to the additional hassle of disruption. And *day-to-day...* is a complex way of saying daily.

This edited version is now about one business rather than many and also uses less than half as many words:

EDITED PARAGRAPH 1 1 sentence of 13 words

Theft and vandalism can disrupt your daily operations and cause heavy financial losses.

Paragraph 2 has some wonky word choices:

ORIGINAL PARAGRAPH 2—40 words

From local neighbourhood shops to

large industrial warehouses, Brand Security can reduce the risk to your premise. Whether it be a new tailored security solution or simply an upgrade of existing equipment, Brand Security has packages to suit all budgets.

First, *shops and warehouses* (plural) convey an "any-business" approach. "Shop" and "warehouse" (singular) mean the one belonging to the prospect.

Meanwhile, a singular *premise*, is a statement that is assumed to be true. A single place of business is a "premises". This type of error will be missed by your spell-checker. If the wrong word is correctly spelled, spell check ignores it.

The archaic form, *...it be...* sounds pretentious to modern readers. Avoid referring to your products and services as *...solutions...*, unless you explain the problems. The last sentence goes general again, promising *...to suit all budgets...*

The edited version is not only shorter but also sharper:

EDITED PARAGRAPH 2—34 words

Whether your premises are a local shop or a huge warehouse, Brand Security can reduce the risk. Let us upgrade your current system or tailor a new one to suit your needs and budget.

Paragraph 3 has a very common grammatical error:

ORIGINAL PARAGRAPH 3—30 words

The Brand range of systems are designed to help you safeguard your business. With advanced and reliable technology, and using strategically placed sensors, the 999 Series will have you covered.

...range... is the subject of the sentence, and it is singular, so it needs a singular verb. *...systems...* is the object of a preposition *...of...* and has nothing to do with the verb.

Next, *...using strategically-placed sensors...* bothers me. It hints that placing the sensors is my problem rather than something Brand Security does for me. And *...the 999 series...* explodes out of left field. The copy switches from the general to the specific, with no warning.



As there is enough preamble in the first two paragraphs, the meat of the story—the 999 series—should instead move to the front of the paragraph:

EDITED PARAGRAPH

3—29 words

With its advanced, reliable technology, the 999 Series is designed for business use. Our trained technicians will place the sensors in strategic positions, and your business will be covered.

With no increase in word count, it is now clear that this paragraph starts the 999 story. The prospect is now also reassured that Brand Security handles the sensor placement.

Now compare the copy as published with the edited version for readability scores:

ORIGINAL Security Systems

Each year businesses lose millions of dollars to theft and vandalism, which is not only costly, but can also disrupt the day-to-day operation of any business.

From local neighbourhood shops to large industrial warehouses, Brand Security can reduce the risk to your premise. Whether it be a new tailored security solution or simply an upgrade of existing equipment, Brand Security has packages to suit all budgets.

The Brand range of systems are designed to help you safeguard your business. With advanced and reliable technology, and using strategically placed sensors, the 999 Series will have you covered.

Words 96, sentences 5, average words/sentence 19. Flesch reading ease score: 32.2—Grade Level 12+.

EDITED Security Systems

Theft and vandalism can disrupt your daily operations and cause heavy financial losses.

Whether your premises are a local shop or a huge warehouse, Brand Security can reduce the risk. Let us upgrade your current system or tailor a new one to suit your needs and budget.

With its advanced, reliable technology, the 999 Series is designed for business use. Our trained technicians will place the sensors in strategic positions, and your business will be covered.

Words 76, sentences 5, average words/sentence 15. Flesch reading ease score: 50—Grade Level 10.

As you can see, the edited version is easier to read according to the Flesch and Flesch-Kincaid (F-K) scales. The Flesch-Kincaid scale only goes to year 12, but a Flesch score of 32.2 is university level.

More to it than just marketing

Like so many other great writers, George Orwell believes there is a link between clear writing and clear thinking. In 1946, he published an essay that has become almost as famous as his books and called *Politics and the English Language*. It's available at <<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm>> and many other websites. As he writes in the essay: "...the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts."

His suggestions for avoiding sloppy language, and therefore sloppy thinking, are:

- "Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent."

Legal language is often described as the epitome of "high" language. Here's what an American law professor has to say about it in Vol.5 of *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing* (1994-1995).

“the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.” —George Orwell

"It is much harder to simplify than to complicate. Anybody can take the sludge from books, thicken it with a few more provisions, and leave it at that. Only the best minds and best writers can cut through. In short, writing simply and directly only looks easy. It takes skill and work and fair time to compose..." —Professor Joseph Kimble, B.A., J.D. Thomas M. Cooley Law School, Michigan USA.

That's why I say that when it comes to written language, the direction of dumb is UP, not down. And the most famous smart person in history seems to agree...

"If you can't explain something simply, you don't understand it well."

—Albert Einstein.

Whenever you see complicated language, especially long, convoluted sentences full of passive verbs and big words, you can be pretty sure that the following is true about the author:

- He or she does NOT know what they're writing about, or
- He or she DOES know what they're writing about, but doesn't want YOU to know. In this case, the writer has one of three possible motives for keeping you in the dark:
 - to keep the knowledge within an elite priesthood to maintain their incomes at artificially high levels,
 - to con you, scam you, rip you off or
 - to avoid responsibility.

In none of these cases should you trust the author, nor should you buy whatever the author is trying to sell you.

It follows that if you want your readers to buy whatever you're selling, you should use the clearest, simplest, most precise and muscular English you can craft. ●

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