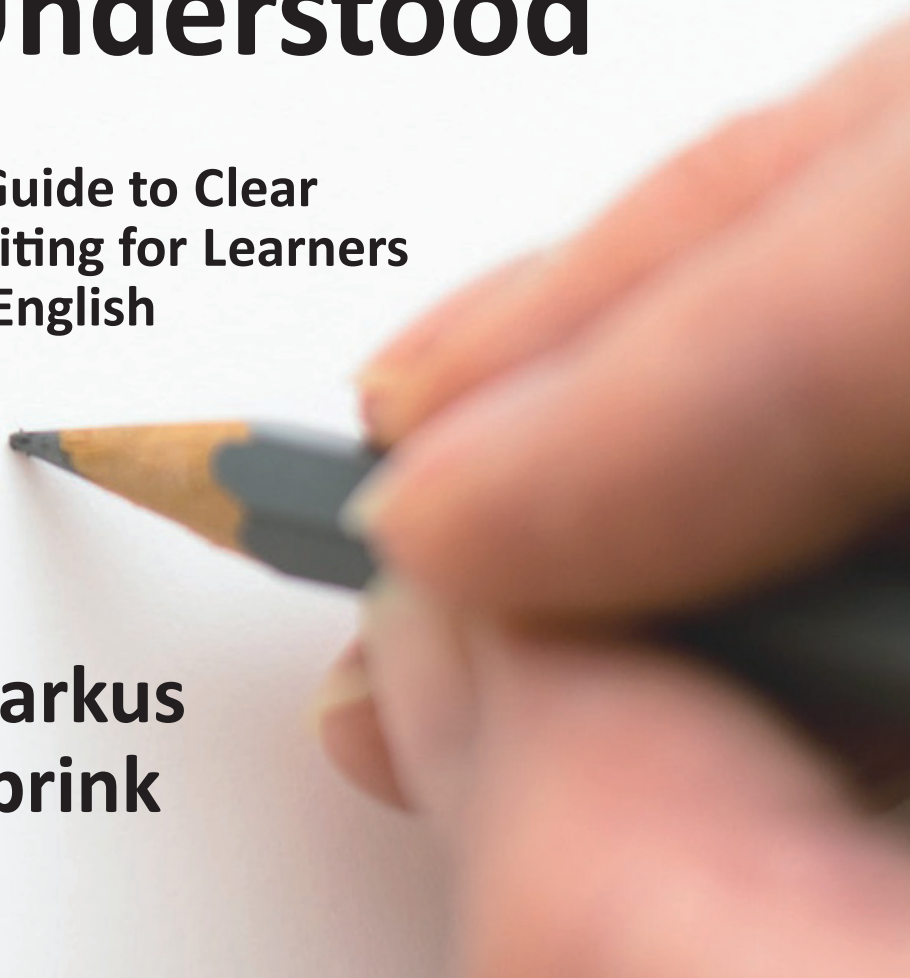


The Subtle Art of Being Understood

**A Guide to Clear
Writing for Learners
of English**

**Markus
Öbrink**



Palacký University Olomouc

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The Subtle Art of Being Understood

A guide to clear writing for learners of English

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Introduction: Who can make use of this book?

This book is written for everyone who needs to write in English but finds it difficult. My main target group, however, is students and the writing they need in their studies. The language the book teaches is useful in an academic environment, but some of the stuff here can be used outside academia as well. The ideas are not unique, but build on many sources and concepts, for example Plain English. My aim is to make these principles accessible and give practical advice on how to improve.

To take maximum advantage of the ideas in here, however, you need to know English fairly well already. If your level is below B2 (according to CEFR), I would suggest working on grammar and vocabulary instead of focusing on writing. You can start using this book, of course, even if your level is low. But everything will be much more difficult, since you'll have to fight with both language and writing. But on the other hand, aiming high is always good. Just be warned!

My aim has been to write a book that isn't a textbook. There's no grammar explained in here, and there are no exercises. Instead, I try to explain the ideas behind writing. Why do we do it? How can it go wrong? The practical bits, like grammar and vocabulary, can be found in any common textbook. It's the same language, after all, no matter if you write or

speak, and the stuff you learn in an everyday language course is enough to handle writing as well.

I've divided this book into different parts, each dealing with a different aspect of writing. The last part, which is about what we can do, is by far the most practical, being full of examples and exercises. The rest is important too, though, giving the background to these examples and explaining the ideas behind why we should do what we do. I would therefore suggest you to read all of the book. The beginning might feel a bit theoretical and slow, but it will help you to understand the more practical stuff.

Aiming at learners, I've also tried to keep the language as simple as possible. A book about how to write in a way people can understand shouldn't be difficult. It would perhaps be ironic, but it wouldn't be clever. The language is, however, not necessarily a good model. This is especially true if you write academic texts. The differences are not mile-wide, but they still exist, the main one being the level of formality. I've endeavoured to keep this text informal, while an academic text really should do the opposite.

Academic writing is an issue in itself. I've taught university students to write for a few years now, and one thing that I keep noting is that they've never been taught how to write. It's like everyone thinks you become a good writer just by taking a degree. The truth is rather different, I'm afraid. Many academics are, in my experience, rather bad writers. It's not their own

fault though. Nobody has ever told them they need to practice to become good at writing, and very few of them have had simple things, like keeping the audience in mind and trying to write in an attractive way, explained.

I've also tried to keep everything as short and concise as possible. The language should be understandable for everyone with English on level B2 and higher. Reading this book will hopefully help you to improve your English as well. You should check any words you find that you don't know in your dictionary (it's always good to collect new vocabulary). The grammar I've used is fairly simple too. I've actively tried to avoid more complex constructions. I haven't done this only to make it easier to read. It's also to demonstrate that you can write texts, even longer ones, without perfect command of English grammar. Basic knowledge can take you quite a long way.

The inspiration and ideas have come from many sources, and those I mention specifically in the text can be found in the back of the book. That list is a very good start for those who wish to go deeper into the problems of writing. Please use it to find how to continue learning. But keep in mind that many of those books and articles are not meant for learners of English, but native speakers.

Part 1: Why do we write?

You want to write.

This I know, for you wouldn't be reading this book otherwise. There are some issues you have, something that makes you doubt your writing skills, and now you're hoping this book will help you.

It will, don't worry!

Step by step, we'll go through why we fail when we write and see what we can do to improve. The first of these steps is quite simple. It's just a short question. Not a difficult one either, to be honest, but a normal, straightforward and honest question that just might change everything about how you write. So, here it goes:

Why?

Yes, the first step in writing is to ask yourself why you're doing it in the first place. There's bound to be a good reason. You might want to communicate an idea, some arguments or opinions, or to ask for something, or perhaps to give support or to criticise. Do you want to persuade me of the best way to cook chicken? Or make me vote one way or the other in the next elections? Or perhaps you've done some brilliant research and want me to know the results? You might also wish to invite me to a conference, or simply just ask for some information. Well, whatever the reason, you have to be aware of it.

And here I'm talking about actively aware, not just keeping it in the back of your head but not thinking much about it. Don't only keep it in there, but write it down on a sticky note and put it at the top of your monitor. That way you'll be reminded of it constantly.

Why is this so important?

Because whatever you write, your aim will change the way you express yourself. The aim is an integrated part of your writing. We write in different ways depending on what we want out of it, and this has to be part of the design already from the start. You have to have a clear goal to be able to go in the right direction, and writing itself is a tricky affair, so the clearer you can be the better.

Another key factor is who you're writing for. Who the intended reader is will determine what level you aim for, and what kind of vocabulary and formulations you use. A research article for a peer-reviewed journal will have more advanced language, since it aims at people who themselves are active in the field. It will use terminology everyone in the discipline knows and formulations they're used to seeing. But others, who are not part of that field, might have serious problems understanding such a text. In the same way, a text written for young school children who have just learned to read and write will have very simple language with quite basic vocabulary. The kids would just stop reading otherwise, discouraged by the fact they don't get it.

It's the same no matter what you write. It might be a text book, a popular science article, a news piece, a letter to a friend, a request to your insurance company or really anything else. The same rule applies: we have to adapt to our audience. If you write so that they can understand, they will understand. What do you need to do to make these people listen and understand? Simplify your language? Sound more personal or perhaps more impersonal? Offer something? It sounds so simple, and yet it's something so many people forget about.

So basically, first of all we need to know what it is we want to say and to whom we want to say it. This is called *Audience* and *Purpose*, and is the first step in the writing process. Before we can do anything we need to sketch up the goals and visions we have, and carefully consider who the audience is. Ask yourself the questions I mentioned above, and take notes.

That's a ground rule I have: always take notes. I don't believe in just thinking about things, and this is a thing I come back to many times in this book. I repeat it so often you might even get sick of it. But then again, it's so important it deserves to be repeated. So, here it is: everything tends to sound clever enough when we sink down in the sofa with a cup of coffee and just contemplate. But once you start putting it down on paper you force yourself to formulate, and this means you'll have to get specific. And there's really nothing better than being specific when you need something done. It's the first piece of your roadmap, and once you have that clear starting