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Episode #038
How To Write Effectively // George Orwell's Six Rules
For Writing
March 24, 2020



[00:00:04] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:00:10] Where you can improve your English while learning fascinating things about the world.

[00:00:16] I'm Alastair Budge.

[00:00:19] Today we are talking about a personal hero of mine.

[00:00:23] A fantastic writer and someone who we can all learn a lot from when communicating in English.

[00:00:32] That person is George Orwell, and today we are going to talk about his six rules for effective writing in English.

[00:00:44] Before we get right into it, though, let me just remind those of you listening on Spotify, Google Podcasts, iVoox or wherever you get your podcasts that if you want



to listen to the podcast with the transcript and key vocabulary in front of you, you can get that over on the website, which is [Leonardoenglish.com](http://leonardoenglish.com).

[00:01:05] Especially for those of you that have found that you are at home slightly more than usual and are looking for a way to improve your English even faster than you would do just by listening.

[00:01:16] I'd definitely recommend checking out becoming a member of Leonardo English.

[00:01:22] Membership gives you access to all of the transcripts and key vocabulary for every podcast we've ever done.

[00:01:29] That's over 40 now, including all of the bonus episodes.

[00:01:34] It really is a super useful resource for your learning.

[00:01:38] And we also have a 30 day no questions asked guarantee if you're not happy, so if you haven't checked that out already, I'd recommend having a look.

[00:01:47] You can find out more at leonardoenglish.com forward slash subscribe.

[00:01:54] Okay then, George Orwell.

[00:01:57] He is probably most famous for two novels: Animal Farm and 1984.

[00:02:05] I guess you may have heard of those two books.



[00:02:09] Maybe you've read them in translation or perhaps you've even read them in English.

[00:02:15] We aren't going to talk about them at length today, but it is just worth talking about the world when he wrote the books.

[00:02:24] He wrote Animal Farm in 1945, he wrote 1984 in 1948 - the reason that it's called 1984 is that it's just 48 backwards.

[00:02:39] And what we're going to be talking about today, his six rules on writing, comes from an essay that he wrote in 1946.

[00:02:50] So what's important about the time that he wrote these?

[00:02:55] Well, they were written in the period just after the Second World War, after the Nazis had shown the world quite the power of [rhetoric](#)¹ and of [propaganda](#)².

[00:03:09] Of how politicians can use the media and language to push their own message.

¹ speech or writing intended to be effective and influence people

² information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions



[00:03:17] Orwell had seen how politicians used language to make people believe certain things and how language could be [twisted](#)³ and turned in order to [advance](#)⁴ the aims of a particular political party.

[00:03:35] So in 1946 he published an essay called Politics and The English Language, and as part of this, he [set out](#)⁵ six rules for writing.

[00:03:50] The essay is actually only 5,000 words long, about 10 pages long.

[00:03:56] I'll put a link to it in the episode notes if you're interested.

[00:04:01] He does write pretty clearly, so I definitely recommend at least taking a look at it.

[00:04:07] Today though, we are going to go through his six rules of writing.

[00:04:14] They do apply to written English, although I think there is a lot in there that can be applied also to spoken English and just generally good communication skills.

[00:04:29] Now, depending on what your mother tongue is, these might seem like really strange rules, really [bizarre](#)⁶ guidelines, but I promise that if you follow these rules set

³ changed from its original meaning

⁴ to go or move something forward, or to develop or improve something

⁵ to give the details of or explain something, esp. in writing

⁶ very strange and unusual



out by one of the finest writers in English, then you will sound more [concise](#)⁷, more [articulate](#)⁸, and will be a more effective communicator in English.

[00:04:57] I'll read out all of the six rules now.

[00:05:00] Then we'll go into each one in more detail.

[00:05:03] The first rule is "never use a [metaphor](#)⁹, [simile](#)¹⁰, or other figure of speech, which you are used to seeing [in print](#)¹¹".

[00:05:14] The second rule is "never use a long word where a short one will do".

[00:05:20] Third, it's "if it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out".

[00:05:29] Fourth, we have "never use the passive where you can use the active".

[00:05:37] And fifth, our [penultimate](#)¹² rule, is "never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a [jargon](#)¹³ word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent".

⁷ short and clear, expressing what needs to be said without unnecessary words

⁸ able to express thoughts and feelings easily and clearly, or showing this quality

⁹ an expression, often found in literature, that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object

¹⁰ (the use of) an expression comparing one thing with another, always including the words "as" or "like"

¹¹ in writing

¹² second from the last

¹³ special words and phrases that are used by particular groups of people, especially in their work



[00:05:52] And the final rule is "break any of these rules sooner than say anything [outright¹⁴](#) [barbarous¹⁵](#)".

[00:06:01] So, let's talk about these rules individually.

[00:06:06] So to remind you, our first one is "never use a [metaphor](#), [simile](#), or other figure of speech, which you are used to seeing [in print](#)".

[00:06:17] Just in case you didn't know what a [metaphor](#) and [simile](#) are, a [metaphor](#) is when you use a word to describe something as something else, to say something is something else.

[00:06:31] And a [simile](#) is when you say that something is like something else, for example, saying that "*he is a pig at the table*" is a metaphor, but saying "*he eats like a pig*" is a [simile](#).

[00:06:47] Does that make sense?

[00:06:49] What Orwell is saying here is that you shouldn't just use a [metaphor](#) or [simile](#) because you have heard it elsewhere.

[00:06:58] You should only use one if it actually helps you get your point across.

[00:07:04] So with the previous example of saying he is a pig at the table, that's okay, actually, because it's a live [metaphor](#).

¹⁴ completely or immediately

¹⁵ extremely cruel or unpleasant, or failing to reach acceptable social standards



[00:07:15] The reader probably knows what it means and it actually helps get the point across that he is a [messy¹⁶](#) eater.

[00:07:25] But English is full of dead [metaphors](#), things that people just use because they have heard them being used, but the actual words don't help you to visualise what you are trying to describe.

[00:07:40] If that's the case, then you shouldn't use these [metaphors](#).

[00:07:45] It would only serve to confuse the reader or listener, and therefore has no purpose.

[00:07:52] Our second rule is "never use a long word when a short one we'll do".

[00:08:02] Now, I guess I don't need to explain what this rule is, but what I will do is explain why it's important.

[00:08:09] Lots of people, when speaking any language, try to use longer words when shorter, more common words have exactly the same meaning.

[00:08:21] Why do people do this?

¹⁶ untidy



[00:08:23] Well, it's partly to [show off](#)¹⁷, to show people how [extensive](#)¹⁸ their vocabulary is, but it's also to confuse, and to make people more likely to believe what they are saying if they think that the person saying it is clever because they are using longer and more complicated words.

[00:08:47] The result of this, according to Orwell, is that arguments aren't [evaluated](#)¹⁹ on their [merits](#)²⁰ alone and ideas that would otherwise be [rubbished](#)²¹, not be considered valuable, they manage to gain popularity just because of the way in which they are communicated.

[00:09:10] So an example of a long word where a short one would do, might be using the word "necessitate" instead of need or "endeavour" instead of try.

[00:09:23] Our third rule is quite similar.

[00:09:28] It's that "if it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out".

[00:09:35] If you don't need to say or write a word, don't write it, don't say it.

¹⁷ to behave in a way that is intended to attract attention or admiration, and that other people often find annoying

¹⁸ covering a large area ; having a great range

¹⁹ to judge or calculate the quality, importance, amount, or value of something

²⁰ the quality of being good and deserving praise

²¹ criticised, not considered worthy



[00:09:42] There are a load of words in English that don't actually need to be used, but people still use them in sentences.

[00:09:52] For example, saying "the reason why".

[00:09:56] You don't need the word "why" because "the reason" already [implies](#)²² that there is a way.

[00:10:04] So instead of saying "the reason why he listens to the podcast", you should just say "the reason he listens to the podcast".

[00:10:14] Or "in 10 years time", you don't need the "time" because "in 10 years" already [implies](#) the idea of time.

[00:10:26] His fourth rule is one that might seem strange to you, and that's never use the passive where you can use the active.

[00:10:36] So just to clarify, this is that you should say, "I ate the apple" rather than "the apple was eaten by me".

[00:10:45] Yes of course it's good to know how to use the passive voice, and this doesn't mean that you should never use the passive, but when you are speaking or writing, using the passive voice is often unnecessarily confusing and you should always use the active voice where it makes sense.

²² to communicate an idea or feeling without saying it directly



[00:11:10] For example here, I just said "you should use the active voice" instead of "the active voice should be used".

[00:11:18] It's far easier to understand and far easier for the listener to process or for the reader to comprehend.

[00:11:29] It's also more [forceful²³](#), right?

[00:11:32] It actually explains what happens, someone does something actively, that's the thing that happens, so that should be the focus of the sentence.

[00:11:43] So whenever possible, use the active, not the passive.

[00:11:48] Say use the active, don't say the active should be used.

[00:11:53] Got it?

[00:11:54] Good.

[00:11:56] Our fifth, our [penultimate](#) rule, is "never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a [jargon](#) word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent".

[00:12:11] So to clarify on that, [jargon](#) means a special kind of word only used by a specific group, a word that isn't that easy for others to understand.

²³ expressing opinions strongly and demanding attention or action



[00:12:23] There's often a [temptation](#)²⁴ by people to try to use a word that they think might make them sound more intelligent because it shows that they are familiar with certain terms or expressions.

[00:12:39] But if this means that the person listening to you or reading what you've written can't understand what good is that?

[00:12:47] What was the point?

[00:12:50] I know that this is one probably more appropriate for native speakers, but it's also just worth pointing out, even for non native speakers, so you can recognise when a native speaker is using vocabulary that is unnecessarily complicated and then you can understand that complicated doesn't necessarily mean good.

[00:13:17] And our final rule, which I guess is actually quite a fun one, is "break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright [barbarous](#)".

[00:13:29] That is to say that you should consider these rules as guidelines and if following them means that you end up saying something ridiculous, then of course, break the rule.

[00:13:41] Okay, so let's just [recap](#)²⁵ on our six rules

²⁴ something that makes you want to do or have something that you know you should not

²⁵ to repeat the main points of an explanation or description



[00:13:46] Firstly, we have "never use a [metaphor](#), [simile](#) or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing [in print](#)".

[00:13:56] Secondly, it was "never use a long word where a short one will do".

[00:14:02] Thirdly, it's "if it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out".

[00:14:10] Forth, it's "never use the passive where you can use the active".

[00:14:16] Fifth, we have "never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a [jargon](#) word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent".

[00:14:28] And sixth, it's "break any of those rules sooner than say anything outright [barbarous](#)".

[00:14:37] These are certainly things that I try to keep in mind when I'm speaking or writing, and it's not always easy.

[00:14:46] Communicating clearly is hard enough when you are a native speaker.

[00:14:52] But you could also say that as a non-native speaker, you are [starting from scratch](#)²⁶, or at least you are starting without the same bad habits that many native speakers already have.

[00:15:06] So on one level, you may find it easier to stick to these rules.

²⁶ starting from the beginning



[00:15:11] And if you do, well, not only will George Orwell be [smiling down on you](#)²⁷, but you'll also find yourself communicating in a far more effective way.

[00:15:24] Okay, I hope that this has been an interesting little look at these tips on six rules for writing.

[00:15:32] Quite often when you see a blog or podcast episode that has 10 rules for X or Y, you aren't really sure whether to trust it, as it could have been written by anyone, but at least on this one, these rules come straight from the pen of one of the finest writers in English of all time.

[00:15:53] So they are definitely worth paying attention to.

[00:15:56] And of course, trying to stick to, if you can.

[00:16:00] Just as a reminder, for those of you who are looking for the transcript and key vocabulary and are interested in becoming a member of Leonardo English, you can find out more and get the transcript and key vocabulary on leonardoenglish.com.

[00:16:15] We have now released 41 episodes, I think it is, including the bonus member only ones.

[00:16:22] And if you become a member, then you get access to the transcript and key vocabulary for every one of those episodes, which, especially if you are someone who is

²⁷ this implies that someone who is dead will be happy or glad with your actions



going to be at home for awhile, will be a really useful resource to help improve your English.

[00:16:39] Plus, of course, we will be keeping to our usual schedule of releasing two new episodes a week with bonus longer ones at least once a month.

[00:16:49] And of course, just as a final point, if you have thoughts, feedback, questions about this episode or anything else for that matter, please do get in touch.

[00:16:59] You can reach us at hi 'hi' @leonardoenglish.com.

[00:17:04] I personally read and respond to every email, and I'd love to hear what you think of the show.

[00:17:10] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:17:15] I'm Alastair Budge.

[00:17:16] Stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]



Key vocabulary

Word

Definition

Rhetoric

speech or writing intended to be effective and influence people

Propaganda

information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions

Twisted

changed from its original meaning

Advance

to go or move something forward, or to develop or improve something

Set out

to give the details of or explain something, esp. in writing

Bizarre

very strange and unusual

Concise

short and clear, expressing what needs to be said without unnecessary words

Articulate

able to express thoughts and feelings easily and clearly, or showing this quality

Metaphor

an expression, often found in literature, that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object



Simile	(the use of) an expression comparing one thing with another, always including the words "as" or "like"
In print	in writing
Penultimate	second from the last
Jargon	special words and phrases that are used by particular groups of people, especially in their work
Outright	completely or immediately
Barbarous	extremely cruel or unpleasant, or failing to reach acceptable social standards
Messy	untidy
Show off	to behave in a way that is intended to attract attention or admiration, and that other people often find annoying
Extensive	covering a large area ; having a great range
Evaluated	to judge or calculate the quality, importance, amount, or value of something
Merits	the quality of being good and deserving praise
Rubbished	criticised, not considered worthy



- Implies** to communicate an idea or feeling without saying it directly
- Forceful** expressing opinions strongly and demanding attention or action
- Temptation** something that makes you want to do or have something that you know you should not
- Recap** to repeat the main points of an explanation or description
- Starting from scratch** starting from the beginning
- Smiling down on you** this implies that someone who is dead will be happy or glad with your actions

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.

