

THIRTY SIX PIECES OF ADVICE ABOUT HOW TO BE A LIBERTARIAN (AND LIBERTARIAN ALLIANCE) WRITER

DAVID BOTSFORD



1. **Read Orwell on the English language** — and then put him back on the shelf. One of the most frequently cited guides to effective writing is George Orwell's classic essay "Politics and the English Language" (1946), which every writer who wants to be effective will benefit from reading. Orwell's six guidelines for good writing are as follows:

- i. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- ii. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- iii. If it is possible to cut a word out, cut it out.
- iv. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- v. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- vi. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.¹

I would suggest that, to the neophyte communicator, the learned suggestions advanced above by the author of *Nineteen Eighty-four* should not be considered as Gospel truth. If you investigate Orwell's *oeuvre*, you will find that he often breaks his own rules. And such writers as Shakespeare, Milton and Gibbon would be as dead as a doornail if they were re-written to comply with Orwell's guidelines. *Faute de mieux*, however, any writer who sticks to these guidelines won't go far wrong.

Another book worth looking through, and perhaps owning, is the *Economist* magazine's style manual, which is published as a slim hardback containing both writing tips and useful political and economic reference material.

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25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street,
London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk
email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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David Botsford is a freelance writer and therapist. He has written extensively for the Libertarian Alliance on a wide range of subjects including the cinema, education, gun control, and the case against Britain being part of the Europe Union.

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



2. **Write what you know about.** This may seem to be an obvious point, but you would be surprised by the ignorance often displayed by self-righteous leader-writers and columnists when they pontificate on subjects about which they do not have even the most superficial knowledge. In choosing topics to write about, concentrate on those things you've personally studied and experienced, and communicate what you have learned about them. Avoid writing about any subject unless and until you've studied it. As they said during the Grenadian revolution, "If you know, teach; if you don't, learn."

3. **Include "pictures and conversations".** In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll's young heroine wonders how her older sister can read a book without pictures or conversations. Although you may not be able literally to include these, try to "illustrate" your writing by quotations, examples, literary and cultural references, selections from newspaper interviews and so on. This will encourage people to keep reading. Libertarian writing doesn't need to read like an accountancy textbook.

4. **Use recognised authorities as far as possible.** Unless you are a very well recognised and respected expert in the field about which you are writing, aim to back up your arguments by citing the considered opinions of such experts. This is especially true if you are writing about a highly controversial area. In 1996, shortly after the Dunblane massacre, I was invited to address an Advertising Standards Authority conference on violence, giving a libertarian view on the growth of violence and the private ownership of guns at a time when most of the media and "public opinion" were engaged in a national witch-hunt against gun owners. I knew that those police officers who knew most about the role of guns in crime correctly recognised that the proposal for a handgun ban was both futile and counter-productive in combating armed criminals. The only way to convey any credibility for the libertarian approach was to give extensive quotations from these policemen and other recognised experts, as well as a lot of information about the reality of crime in today's world, which I gleaned from the most recent books and newspaper articles on the subject. If I had quoted some libertarian gun enthusiast in Wyoming to support my case, it would have had no credibility at all.²

Whatever subject you are discussing, if you can cite the opinion of a distinguished expert in support of your position, do so in the form of a correct quotation, taken in context, and giving an accurate reference. All in all, the opinion of a Nobel Laureate or winner of the Order of Merit writing about his own specialist subject in a book published by the Oxford or Cambridge University Presses

or in the *Times Literary Supplement*, will give more weight to your argument with more people than the opinion of an unknown American anarcho-Objectivist college drop-out expressed in some newsletter with a circulation of 27 which went defunct in 1966. I am not saying this is necessarily a good thing, but that's the way it is.

5. Link your ideas with the real world. Many people find questions of abstract philosophy incomprehensible or irrelevant, so cite specific examples in the real world to make your point plausible.

6. If possible, take the discussion away from politics and economics. I believe that libertarianism is not, strictly speaking, a political or economic philosophy, but it is forced to address political questions because the political, legal and economic system keeps getting in the way of beneficial libertarian activities. The point is to pull back the heavy hand of state intervention and to allow people to do things in a variety of ways as they see fit. What sort of things might people do — or are they doing — with this new-found freedom, in such areas as education, health, welfare, technology, drug-taking, sexuality, culture, life extension, business management, or any other area you care to name? Show how people are actually going to be demonstrably better off in every respect — and how they might do things in very different ways — as they gain greater and greater freedom.

7. Read good writers who wear their scholarship lightly. The more you read, particularly of good writers, the better at writing you'll be yourself. Read especially those writers who are distinguished specialists in their field, but who "wear their scholarship lightly" and write in an interesting way accessible to the general reader. Such figures include, among numerous others, Bertrand Russell, A. J. P. Taylor, Ivan Illich, P. J. O'Rourke, Richard Dawkins, Henry Hazlitt, Sir Ernst Gombrich and, of course, George Orwell. Their writing style is the sort of thing which large numbers of people want to read.

8. Everybody has the right to have their ideas examined one at a time. One of the less useful habits within "the movement" is that of arbitrarily classifying people as "sound" or "unsound" based on their views on one particular subject. In fact, there are many individuals who are normally classified as "left-wingers" who are, in fact, considerably more libertarian on many issues than most conservatives or "right-wingers". Examples include Ivan Illich, Wilhelm Reich, Noam Chomsky, Tony Benn, John Mortimer, Roland Meighan, A. S. Neill, R. D. Laing, Bertrand Russell, and the Most Reverend Richard Holloway, Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. Accept that individuals often have a variety of views to put forward, each of which must be accepted or rejected on its merits. Personally, I do not believe that libertarianism is either "right-wing" or "left-wing". On the contrary, it challenges threats to freedom from both the "right" and the "left", and is not necessarily allied to "right-wingers" against "leftists".

9. As far as possible, discuss subjects that haven't been covered in detail. Avoid the old chestnuts. Libertarian insights might be brought to bear on a vast range of subjects which have, as far as I am aware, hardly been touched upon. Some subjects which I am interested in learning more about, and vaguely hope to write about at

some future date, include: the relationship between complementary medicine and orthodox medicine in maintaining health; a study of the visual arts; the existentialist movement in philosophy and literature; how new technology, such as the Internet and multimedia, might be used in a more libertarian system of education; how individuals can protect themselves financially from the threat of economic and monetary union in Europe, and the severe depression which it is guaranteed to bring about; how historians use their expertise to challenge propaganda claims.

10. Don't just sloganise — explain in detail. Most issues are complex, and cannot usefully be reduced to mere slogans. It is far better to describe the issues involved in any area of discussion, and explain to a reader (who may be sceptical) why he or she should support the libertarian position. In order to explain what I consider to be the libertarian position on education, and to demonstrate how that differed at the most fundamental philosophical level from that of the Tories, I had to write eleven pamphlets. Anything less would not have done justice to the subject.

11. In defence of Mr Gradgrind. In Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times*, one of the less attractive characters is the school owner Mr Gradgrind, who admonishes his teachers to teach the children "facts, facts, facts, nothing but facts", and sternly instructs the children to "never wonder". Without going quite so far as Gradgrind, he certainly makes an important point. Give the reader as many incontrovertible facts as it takes to make your case — and keep any speculations down to the bare minimum. Also, check your facts thoroughly against reputable sources of information. If a reader notices even a trivial factual error in your writing, he or she will naturally doubt the accuracy of everything else in the piece.

12. Read important writers in the original. If you are writing about a certain important writer, then as far as possible read his or her original works, or a translation thereof, rather than rely on secondary sources. For instance, when I read a translation of the egoist Max Stirner's extremely heavy work of German philosophy, *The Ego and Its Own*, I found that the man had been grossly misrepresented by many of those who had written about him. Similarly, when I came to write my piece on the early Soviet cinema, I realised that there was a vast amount of secondary material available, some of which I had already read. Instead of writing the piece from that, I decided instead to read translations of the writings of the major film-makers themselves (Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein) and quote directly from them, as well as describing films I had actually seen on the rare occasions on which they are shown at places like the National Film Theatre. I believe that this made for a fresher, more perceptive and more authoritative piece of writing that would have been the case if I had simply recited the judgments of secondary authors. It is true that many original sources are by no means light reading, but the fact that many works have remained in print for decades or centuries is evidence that they have something important to say, and that it is generally worth the trouble to study them.

13. Read and quote from the opposition. It is easy simply to assume that you have all the answers and that

there are no worthwhile arguments against the libertarian position on a certain subject. Seek out points of view which oppose the libertarian position, and address the arguments and facts they present. Then you might like to send a copy of what you've written to the author of the non-libertarian work.

14. Speak softly — but carry a big stick. These words of Theodore Roosevelt, which refer to US foreign policy, can be applied to libertarian writing. Your tone in writing should be moderate. Avoid the gratuitous abuse of people, the use of hysterical language, or over-stating your case; allow the reader to experience anger or enthusiasm because of the facts, analysis and arguments they read, rather than the tone in which it is written.

15. Avoid negatives — state positively. It is often tempting to use the negative qualifier “not”, as in “the extension of the right to issue currency to anyone who wishes to do so would not bring about a total economic collapse”. The way in which the human mind works is that this phrase would be interpreted without the “not”, and the reader would gain the impression that the extension of this right would, in fact, bring about a total economic collapse. Instead, always state your argument in positive terms, stressing the benefits: “the extension of the right to issue currency to anyone who wishes to do so would increase the stability of the value of money, enable people to borrow at lower interest rates, and provide for greater security of investments.”

16. Never underestimate what freedom and the market can achieve. Expose the illusion that those services provided by the state will disappear when provision is transferred to the private sector. There are numerous examples of the excellent provision of welfare services, education, pensions, culture, public libraries, postal services and so on, by the private sector, at reasonable cost and giving a wide degree of choice, to the poor as well as the rich. Find out about them, and cite them.

17. Don't assume that the reader necessarily knows much about the subject. Unless you are writing for a highly specialised, expert readership, assume that the reader has no particular knowledge about the subject. Explain the basic concepts in simple English, and describe any previous discussions in a way which the reader can understand. For instance, instead of just saying “the Nozickian view”, spell it out: “The distinguished philosopher Professor Robert Nozick, of Harvard University, has argued that ...”, so that even people who have never heard of Nozick will understand. Aim to give your writing lasting value — write it so that it will still be relevant thirty years from now. Maybe it won't be, but you don't know that yet.

18. Find something to “hang” your argument on, such as a current event, a television programme, a politician's speech, a book, an article or a film. Use this as a means of introducing a discussion of the subject. It will make your writing relevant, show that you are keeping track of current developments, and be a useful “frame” for your article.

19. Humour is permitted — but let it come out of the subject rather than forcing it. The script for real life was written by Woody Allen. You can include extracts from the script without needing to pay royalties.

20. Read about your subject — preferably the most recent research by the most respected authorities, and those who have actively participated in what they are describing. The more research you do, the better your writing will be.

21. Avoid false over-generalisations. Many Tories launch into generalised attacks on such institutions as the *Guardian*, trade unionists, social workers, polytechnic lecturers, single mothers, “progressive” teaching methods, “left-wing” writers, and numerous others. Don't fall into that trap. Over the past few months, for instance, the *Guardian* has carried, among other pro-libertarian material, lengthy and favourable articles about Ayn Rand and Max More, as well as a devastating account of the link between British socialism and eugenics, continuous *exposés* of EMU in the City pages, the case for withdrawing from the EU by Alan Sked, head of the UK Independence Party, and an attack on art subsidies by Brian Micklethwait. Give credit where it's due.

22. Be sympathetic to the aspirations of the common people. Recognise that liberty is popular and benefits everybody, not just the rich and powerful. Opponents of libertarianism claim that because we are ‘against the welfare state’; that means that first thing tomorrow morning we want to throw old-age pensioners out into the snow to die because they are dependent on it. Explain that this is not the case, but that the existing welfare state provision could gradually, over a period of several decades, be taken over by such schemes as private insurance, friendly societies, trade unions, reliance on families, complementary medicine and charity. Indeed, the financial and demographical figures demonstrate that this change is going to have to be made, and quickly, before the whole system collapses through lack of resources. It is not humane to encourage people to rely on a system which simply hasn't got the money to provide welfare requirements, and will have even less in the future. A free-market welfare service has been done before, and it will be done again.

23. Recognise difficulties and problems with libertarianism. One of the most important insights of the Austrian school is the recognition of the limitations of what we know. Admit this — but show how a free market can increase our knowledge by liberating wider social forces.

24. Avoid taking too many examples from the United States. Because most of the more explicit libertarian material in recent decades has come from the US, there is a temptation simply to copy American examples. Unfortunately, these examples do not always hold in the UK, and there is a certain cultural prejudice over here about what might be interpreted as a crazy idea from the American lunatic fringe. So take your illustrations primarily from the UK (or, where possible, other countries than the US and UK). Also, avoid accepting the idea, expressed by some Americans, that the US is some kind of libertarian paradise inhabited almost exclusively by people with radical libertarian beliefs. It ain't, and never has been.

25. Don't automatically repeat widely-held myths. Many widely-held ideas, and not least about politics, economics, history and science, in fact rest on highly questionable evidence. Before repeating these myths, check them out from the most reputable sources. Demand evidence for outlandish claims. The other day I met an

elderly Scot who earnestly told me about various “miracle inventions” which have been bought up and suppressed by large companies. I told him I’d believe it when I saw definite evidence.

26. Every article should make one specific point. Don’t try to make it do too much, or be too digressive.

27. Avoid comparing your opponents with the German Nazis, except where very strictly relevant. The *Daily Telegraph* has a policy of prohibiting its writers from accusing opponents of being Nazis. Professor Roger Scruton’s column in *The Times* used to compare virtually anyone he disagreed with to the Nazis, which became rather tedious.

28. Don’t look on all writing as necessarily a “win-lose” situation. The purpose of your article is to educate the reader rather than simply to beat the opposition.

29. Don’t assume that libertarianism is a hated philosophy. In many ways it is becoming the orthodoxy. Show how ideas of markets and individual liberty are becoming more and more accepted in more and more areas.

30. Write about people. Make issues into one individual’s story. When, for example, I wrote my first piece for the LA about the cinema I focused on the career of Sergei Eisenstein as a way of presenting the basic facts. If you don’t want to write about someone else, write about yourself in an LA “Personal Perspective”. What attracted you about the libertarian movement? What does it mean to you? People are interested in these things.

31. Avoid sectarianism. One of the less attractive features of the Objectivist movement is its condemnation of “heretics”, “blasphemers” and the like. Avoid anything that might lead to similar developments within the broader freedom movement.

32. Write of the relevance to libertarianism of your interests other than politics and economics. This would include sports, hobbies, entertainment, literature, music, computer games, war games, voluntary activities, and so on. Is there a libertarian “story” there?

33. Avoid parish-pump politics. Most people are not very interested in hearing the details about disputes between Ayn Rand and Nathaniel Branden in the 1960s, or between David Kelley and Leonard Peikoff in the 1990s.

34. Challenge generally accepted ideas about what is and is not on the side of “freedom”. In writings for the LA I have condemned US military, political and economic interventionism in foreign countries, which is carried out in the name of “freedom”, “democracy”, “peace-keeping”, “Americanism”, “the war on drugs”, “the new world order”, or some other fiction, and endeavoured to demonstrate how this world-wide interventionism has devastated the freedom, peace, prosperity and stability of numerous countries, including the US itself. I also exposed the Tory fraud that the British public schools, such as Eton and Winchester, represented “freedom of choice” and “independence from the state”. The facts demonstrate not only the tyrannical, state-backed nature of the regime inside these places, but also the disastrous effect they have had on the freedom of the nation as a whole.

35. Read Micklethwait on footnotes. Brian’s piece about footnotes is essential reading. When you quote di-

rectly from a writer, always cite the book or periodical your quotation comes from, so that anybody who wants to can check the accuracy of the quotation, and that it is not taken out of context. A book reference should include author, title, name of publisher, place of publication, date and page number, as well as translator and volume number where relevant. Periodical references should include title, date and page number. If the writer is quoted in something else, you should write “quoted in” at the beginning of your note. However, if it is at all possible, it is better to quote directly from the original source. It also lends authority to your writing. As Brian says in his piece, “the Oxford University Press has a lot more credibility than Hicksville Press in the state of Antarctica”.³

I don’t think it is necessary to footnote every single statement of fact, but if you include a fact which many readers may question, then footnote your source for it. For instance, in my 1996 piece for the Advertising Standards Authority I included the fact that only two lawfully-owned handguns out of 200,000 had been used in crime in the most recent year in which figures were available. This would have amazed people who were subjected to the media’s anti-gun hysteria which followed the Dunblane massacre, so I footnoted it.⁴ If you can find documented facts like that which expose the fact that the Emperor has no clothes, then use them.

Some writers, such as the late Professor Friedrich Hayek, include a lot of information in footnotes. I do not recommend doing this extensively, as it interrupts the flow of the main argument. Everything worth reading should be in the main body of the text. (You can always put digressions in parentheses. Which reminds me ...)

36. Reduce Brian’s workload. Check your writing thoroughly for misspellings and misprints before you send it in. Use your word processor’s spell-checker, and then check the printed paper for errors, including proper names, which can be checked in reference books. Few people are able to spell Deniss Heally’s name correctly: make sure you’re one of them. If people spot typos, they often assume that the writing itself is inferior. Let Brian have both a hard copy and a PC-formatted 3.5" disk. Also check that the footnotes correspond.

36. Break any of the above rules where necessary. Writing can be time-consuming and difficult, and it is better to write something imperfect than to aim for perfection and not get it. As Chris Tame once put it: “Don’t get it right, get it written.”⁵

NOTES

1. George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”, in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, volume 4, Secker & Warburg, London, 1968, p. 139. (This essay is reproduced in other collections of Orwell’s writings and should be easy to obtain.)
2. An expanded version of this talk to the ASA was published by the Libertarian Alliance as *Fear of Violence and the Current Anti-Gun Hysteria: Blaming Objects Instead of Criminals for Crime*, Political Notes No. 132, 1996.
3. Actually, this is from memory, in order to show what not to do. (Brian Micklethwait, *A Message to All Would-Be Libertarian Alliance Writers on the Vital Importance of Supplying Complete and Completely Accurate Footnotes*, Tactical Notes No. 11, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1992. — Ed.)
4. See *Fear of Violence*, p. 12, and note 103.
5. Quoted in Samuel Edward Konkin III, *New Libertarian Manifesto*, Agorist Institute, Los Angeles, 1980, p. 5.