

# Five Ways to Write Like *The Economist*

By Ross Guberman

**W**hen I fly both here and abroad, I often spot the Blackberry-and-Bluetooth set poring over *The Economist* from the comfort of their airplane seats.

Does the writing in that lauded publication offer any secrets about how to appeal to your client base? Here are five reasons the answer may be yes. Let's look at some examples from a recent issue on everything from the Irish debt crisis to Prince William's engagement.<sup>1</sup>



## 1. Magician's Mark

In his book *A Dash of Style*, top literary agent Noah Lukeman calls the colon the "magician" of punctuation, "one of the most powerful tools" in a writer's arsenal.<sup>2</sup>

Yet other than when introducing lists and quotes, most attorneys do not use the colon as often as they could. Whenever you feel like writing "due to the fact that," "as a result," "therefore," "for that reason," "accordingly," or even "because," consider using a colon instead to make the reader ask "why":

**But spam is still a menace:** blocked at the e-mail inbox, spammers post messages as comments on websites and increasingly on social networks like Twitter and Facebook.<sup>3</sup>

**The principle was absolutely right:** unless default is a possibility, bond investors have no reason to distinguish between good and bad credits.<sup>4</sup>

**If growth recovers, the hole left by years of serial tax cutting and overspending can be plugged:** you need to find spending cuts or tax increases equal only to 2% of GDP to stabilise federal debt by 2015.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Zinger Verbs

Should we lawyers also "take advantage of" the opportunity to "include" vivid verbs in our sentences? Or should we **seize** the chance to **pepper** our sentences with such verbs?

Try swapping the underlined language for some visual and evocative action words:

*Before*

America's tax system is riddled with exemptions that sustain an industry of advisers but undermine economic energy.

The criminal businesses behind spam are competitive and creative. They circumvent technical fixes as fast as the hurdles are erected.

Although Japanese society is growing older faster than anywhere else in the world, plenty of others are not particularly far behind it.

The [Republicans and Democrats] have little time to ponder before a freight train descends upon Capitol Hill.

*After*

America's tax system is riddled with exemptions that **feed** an industry of advisers but **sap** economic energy.<sup>6</sup>

The criminal businesses behind spam are competitive and creative. They **vault over** technical fixes as fast as the hurdles are erected.<sup>7</sup>

Although Japanese society is growing older faster than anywhere else in the world, plenty of others are **shuffling along** behind it.<sup>8</sup>

The [Republicans and Democrats] have little time to ponder before a freight train **thunders into** Capitol Hill.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. That Reminds Me

For any nonfiction writer, evocative examples and analogies are priceless. Like the by-lined writers at *The Wall Street Journal*, the anonymous writers at *The Economist* are adept at using such devices to seduce you into reading about a dry topic. See how the first lines of an article on the European bond market draw you in:

Groucho Marx memorably said that he did not wish to belong to any club that would have him as a member. Some of Europe's more embattled economies may now feel the same about the euro.<sup>10</sup>

Another way to use an example is to give a number that makes an otherwise abstract concept concrete:

All that means that America can sensibly aim for a balance between spending cuts and higher taxes similar to the benchmark set by Britain's coalition government. **A ratio of 75:25 is about right.**<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the most impressive examples are so creative that they make a point stick in your mind long after you've finished reading. Note how *The Economist* uses a clever analogy to link the problems of fighting spam to a misunderstanding of the Internet:

Public behaviour still treats the internet like a village, in which new faces are welcome and anti-social behaviour a rarity. **A better analogy would be a railway station in a big city, where hustlers gather to prey on the credulity of new arrivals.** Wise behavior in such places is to walk fast, avoid eye contact and be brusque with strangers. Try that online.<sup>12</sup>



### 4. Starting Gate

Great writers, legal or otherwise, learn to start their sentences with some speed. See if you can quicken the openings of these five sentences:

**Therefore**, Ireland has long been flirting with a debt crisis of its own. **However**, it has not been helped by the other euro-zone members. **As a threshold matter**, the rescue of Greece was a botch: it fudged the obvious issue that Greece will never fully be able to repay its debts on time. **Additionally**, the temporary support scheme cobbled together for the rest of the euro zone was equally flawed: in particular, it was too easy on private creditors. **Nevertheless, notwithstanding the fact that all this was troubling**, Angela Merkel's attempt to fix it has been spectacularly clumsy.

Here's what *The Economist* actually wrote:

**So** Ireland has long been flirting with a debt crisis of its own. **But** it has not been helped by the other euro-zone members. **To begin with**, the rescue of Greece was a botch: it fudged the obvious issue that Greece will never fully be able to repay its debts on time. **And** the temporary support scheme cobbled together for the rest of the euro zone was equally flawed: in particular, it was too easy on private creditors. **But although all this was troubling**, Angela Merkel's attempt to fix it has been spectacularly clumsy.<sup>13</sup>

Feeling lighter and faster? Your readers will as well.

## 5. Parallel Lives

The knack for parallel construction is a hallmark of great legal writing in any specialty. Here are some choice models from *The Economist*:

*First*, parallel construction in a pair of related sentences about futile efforts to detect spam:

The anti-spam industry has done laudable work in saving e-mail. But it is always one step behind. **When filters blocked missives** with tell-tale words such as “Roles” or “Viagra”, spammers misspelled them (Vi@gra, anyone?). **When filters blocked mail** from suspect network addresses, the spammers used botnets (networks of hijacked computers) instead.<sup>14</sup>

*Second*, parallel construction through antithesis, the rhetorical device that highlights contrasts:

But the real question for Europe is **whether** it wants a slow succession of Greeces and Irelands—or **whether** it is ready to move beyond governmental rescues and focus on growth.<sup>15</sup>

*Third*, parallel construction in a list about spammers and links:

To the spammer, it is moot whether the link is **e-mailed, tweeted, or liked**.<sup>16</sup>

And in a list about the aging Japanese population:

Deregulation [in Japan] would help, **by making** it easier to sell services (such as residential care) to the elderly, **by freeing** up finance to allow them to make better use of their savings, **and by encouraging** more competition in the domestic economy so that it can withstand the inevitable shocks to external trade.<sup>17</sup>

Note that repeating the “by” each time makes the list stronger and clearer.

And finally, in this list about Kate Middleton, Prince William’s future bride:

**That her forebears include** Northumbrian miners and her mother was formerly an air stewardess, **that her parents made** their own

money, **and that she met the prince** at university rather than a stately home, can only do her good.<sup>18</sup>

If these five techniques help you write a bit more like *The Economist*, you could make your readers as happy as we hope Prince William and Kate Middleton will be.

### About the Author

As the president of Legal Writing Pro, Ross Guberman conducts hundreds of writing programs a year for top law firms, governmental agencies, and bar associations. He holds degrees from Yale, the Sorbonne, and The University of Chicago Law School. An adjunct professor at GW Law School, Ross is also an award-winning journalist. In January, Oxford University Press is publishing his *Point Made: How to Write Like the Nation’s Top Advocates*. Contact Ross at [ross@legalwritingpro.com](mailto:ross@legalwritingpro.com)



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- <sup>1</sup> *The Economist* 20-26 Nov. 2010.
  - <sup>2</sup> Lukeman, Noah. *A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation*. New York: Norton, 2006.
  - <sup>3</sup> *The Economist* at 13.
  - <sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 11.
  - <sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 12.
  - <sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 12.
  - <sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 13.
  - <sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 16.
  - <sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 52.
  - <sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 77.
  - <sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 12.
  - <sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 13.
  - <sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 11.
  - <sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 13.
  - <sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 11.
  - <sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 13.
  - <sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 16.
  - <sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 41.