

MODULE 3

Writing Strategies

MOST writers, even professionals, can't write perfect, polished prose on the first go-through. Maybe like you, they find themselves struggling, having to go back through their draft several times before they get it right. In fact, most writers will go through their draft at least three times before they're happy.

Writing is a process of rewriting, rewriting, and rewriting.

The strategies that you use can be critical to the quality of your writing. This module gives you some strategies to help produce well-written drafts quickly. These are the same strategies used by professional writers—people who have to write well everyday.

Some indications your writing process is flawed:

- Writing is a constant struggle—nothing comes out easily and you don't enjoy it.
- You often have to go back and reorganize your work.
- Other people always want to change what you've written.
- You often make embarrassing mistakes that you should have caught.
- It takes you too long to write.

Write faster and better

Some people struggle over every word, while others write quickly with little apparent effort. Here are some tips to help you be a more productive writer.



Tip 1: Prepare an outline

To write well, you need to know where you're going. Your outline (see page 23) is your map. Without one, you're lost.

Tip 2: Write, *then* edit

Don't try to write and edit simultaneously—these tasks should be done on different passes. If you're constantly going back to make changes or correct errors, you're editing as you go, which can be disruptive to your writing. Many writers find that it's better and faster to write first, without trying to make it perfect, then go back later to edit. That way you won't keep derailing your train of thought.

Tip 3: Write, revise, and edit

Plan to go through your document three times before it's ready. The first pass is to draft it. Research and gather

the information you need, then get started. Many writers find that they write best when they write fast, so don't worry about making your document perfect—you can clean it up later.

The second pass is to revise your document. Focus on the big problems—poor organization, missing or incorrect information, problems of clarity, and significant style faults. You may want to rewrite sections or reorganize information.

On the third pass, pay careful attention to grammar, writing style, usage, and punctuation. If all goes well, this should be your final pass.

Tip 4: Give yourself a day or two between rewrites

You may find that it's difficult to edit something that you've just written. This relates to your short-term memory. If you try to edit immediately after writing, you've still got all that information circling around in your head. But if you give it a day or two, you'll have lost much of that short-term memory, and you'll find it easier to revise and edit.

Tip 5: Read out loud

When you're close to finished, read your document out loud and listen to it. Your ear will tell you if problems remain. It's also a great way of telling whether it's conversational or not.

Design a hierarchy

If you're writing a letter, memo, or email, it won't have a hierarchy. Even if it has headings (which is okay if it runs longer than a page or two), the headings will simply identify the main sections—you won't need subsections.

If you're writing a longer document, however, it will likely have a hierarchy—that is, you'll probably divide it into sections and subsections, and maybe even sub-subsections. Without a hierarchy, readers will find it difficult to form a clear mental model of the document, and will take longer to find information. A clear and logical hierarchy is essential for all kinds of longer business documents.

Don't be tempted to create more complicated hierarchies—most professionally prepared documents seldom go deeper than three or four levels. Any deeper and you'll start to confuse the reader.

To make the heading hierarchy apparent to the reader, you'll want to make the section headings look

different than the subsection and sub-subsection headings. Readers should be able to tell at a glance the level of the heading by its typographic attributes. Headings should be formatted using your word processor's *styles* feature.

Heading hierarchy

Heading 1
Heading 2
Heading 3

Rules for logical heading hierarchies:

- Avoid single headings within a section—always have two or more headings.
- Avoid having one heading follow another without any intervening text.
- Don't skip levels (don't have a Heading 1 followed by a Heading 3).

Paragraph frequently

Paragraphing visually organizes related information together. This is one of the ways writers *chunk* information. When you move to the next topic, start a new paragraph.

The average number of sentences in a paragraph in a business document is only three or four. Avoid long paragraphs—they intimidate readers. And never have an entire page consisting of one paragraph. If you want to break up a paragraph, read it

through carefully, looking for a change in the topic. You may have to move a sentence or two.

Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence. Place the most general sentence first, then go into the details—most paragraphs have a top-down structure.

It's okay to let paragraphs break across pages—just avoid single lines at the top or bottom of the page.

Exercise 7: Break up this long paragraph

Limit paragraphs to a single topic or idea. If you find yourself covering several topics, you probably need several paragraphs. It's better to have too many paragraphs than too few. Don't let paragraphs get too long. Most professional writers will average only three or four sentences in a paragraph. Ones that span large areas of the page intimidate readers. Make sure that the opening sentence introduces or summarizes the content of the paragraph. This type of opening sentence is often referred to as the *topic sentence*. The sentences that follow should flow from the first sentence and provide supporting details. Organize paragraphs into a logical sequence. This sequence might be broadest to narrowest, most important to least important, or chronological, depending on the nature of the information. If appropriate, replace paragraphs with bullet lists—they're easier for readers to scan. Avoid including more than three list items in a paragraph. If the items are steps in a procedure, use numbers instead.

Use informative headings

Headings tell readers about the information that follows. Particularly for readers who are skimming and scanning for information, having lots of descriptive headings is important.

Use topical headings – Use headings that describe the topic, not the type of information. If the section relates to a task, use the *-ing* form of the word (for example, “Printing Your Document”).

Use lots of headings – Aim for two or three headings on each page. It’s usually better to have too many headings than too few. If you’ve got a page without any headings, go back and see if you could insert some headings to group and identify the paragraphs. You may have to move paragraphs around. The only exception might be letters, memos, or emails that are a page or two long.

Keep headings short – Limit the number of words in a heading to four or five if possible. Longer headings, particularly ones that wrap onto a second line, are difficult to scan quickly.

Avoid numbering headings – Authors will sometimes number headings to make their place in the document hierarchy more apparent (for example, “6.2, Timing of Reorganization”). This is only appropriate when it’s important to be able to refer to specific sections exactly, such as in specifications or standards documents.

Make headings parallel – Construct similar headings in a similar way. For example, if one heading starts with an imperative verb, then make them all start with an imperative verb (that’s the way these headings are written).

Capitalize appropriately – Decide how you’ll capitalize headings, then do it consistently. You can use the journalism convention of capitalizing only the first word (the way most headings are capitalized in this book), or you can capitalize all of the major words, except articles (such as “the”) and short prepositions (such as “on,” “in,” and “by”).

Headings to avoid

Avoid headings that describe the type of information rather than the topic, such as:

- Overview
- General
- More Information
- Discussion
- Results
- Basics
- Advanced Features
- Miscellaneous
- Policies
- Procedures
- Standards
- Guidelines
- Conclusions
- Reference

Present information graphically

Different types of information lend themselves to different methods of presentation. Don't automatically write paragraph after paragraph. Most people prefer graphic information instead of written information. Look at your own preferences. Would you rather look at a picture or read paragraphs of text? Would you rather read a paragraph or scan a bullet list?

Graphic information is usually:

- less intimidating to the reader
- easier to scan to find information
- easier to understand and act on



Use photographs to show readers what things look like.

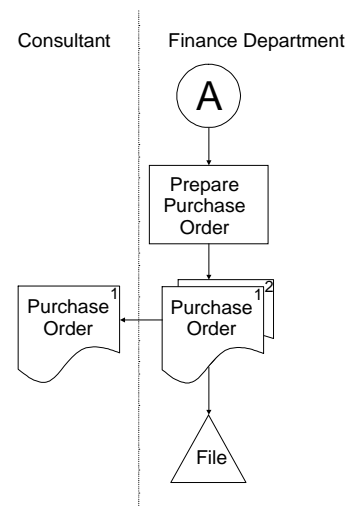
As you're drafting, decide which parts of the information would be better presented as a graphic. If you decide that a bullet list, table, or numbered procedure would be better, you can probably create these yourself. If it's a graphic or icon, you might be able to use clip-art. If it's a technical

illustration or photograph, however, you may need some help.

Think of yourself as a communicator, not a writer.

Ways to present information:

- bullet lists
- checklists
- text boxes
- sidebar text (words pulled out into a wide margin)
- tables
- numbered lists (usually a procedure)
- flow diagrams
- decision trees
- form or screen illustrations
- clip art
- graphics
- warnings, cautions, and notes
- photographs



Use flow diagrams to outline a process.

Edit for clarity

Editing is carefully reviewing a document to verify that it meets appropriate language, usage, and formatting standards. While you can edit your own work, it's usually better to have someone else do it—we are often blind to our own errors. Many business writers have an arrangement with another person to edit each other's writing.

The longer and more complex the document, the more important and more structured editing should become. Editing someone's letter may take only a minute or two; editing their manual could take weeks.

Things to check:

- completeness and accuracy
- appropriate organization of information
- information presented graphically where appropriate
- consistent point of view and writing style
- text written in plain English
- clear and descriptive headings
- correct spelling and grammar
- accurate page references (such as table of contents and cross-references)
- appropriate conventions for numbers and units of measure
- consistency throughout
- conciseness, with redundant and unnecessary words removed
- proper formatting and word processing

Tips:

- Don't try to catch everything on one pass. Go through several times, looking for different things each time.
- Once you notice a problem, look specifically for that problem elsewhere.
- Use, but don't rely on, computerized spelling and style checkers.
- Don't edit exclusively on the screen—some problems are easier to spot in print.

Editing etiquette:

- Offer constructive suggestions—don't criticize.
- Suggest changes where possible—don't just say "this is wrong."
- Only change errors or things that can be improved—don't simply substitute your wording. Have a reason for every change.
- Point out positive aspects of the writing too (Gee, I really liked the introduction!).
- When you're being edited, don't take offence and challenge the editor.

Exercise 8: Editing challenge

Can you find the 12 errors in the following paragraph?

If you don't have a professional editor available, you're best writer will have to due. Or consider contracting the services of a professional editor—their services can we worth their wait in gold. Writer's should not edit their own writing, because they are often blind to their own erros. After an edit, the editor and writer should review the changes together. This will help the writer understand reasons behind the changes. A styleguide should be use to sort out differences of opinion



Signs and Notices From Around the World:

Moscow Hotel (across from a monestary) Zurich Hotel

You are welcome to visit the cemetery where famous Russian and Soviet composers, artists and writers are buried daily except Thursday.

Because of the impropriety of entertaining guests of the opposite sex in the bedroom, it is suggested that the lobby be used for this purpose.

Yugoslav Hotel

The flattening of underwear with pleasure is the job of the chambermaid.

Copenhagen Airline Ticket Office

We take your bags and send them in all directions.

Review and approvals

Most business writing is *collaborative*—that is, you work with others to prepare, review, and approve your documents. Having other people review, edit, and approve your work is part of the normal writing process in business.

For letters, memos, and other short documents, reviews and approvals may be quick and simple. But for longer documents, such as long reports and manuals, the technical review and approval process must be carefully planned to ensure that it's thorough and doesn't delay completion of the document.

Review options

Think about the pros and cons of these different approaches:

- Send reviewers a print copy to mark up and return.
- Give reviewers access to the word processor file and let them make their changes themselves.
- Invite reviewers to a meeting to discuss their comments on the draft.
- Invite reviewers to a meeting to introduce the draft and carefully walk them through the contents.

Tips for successful reviews:

- limit the number of reviewers
- provide reviewers with clear instructions
- give reviewers a reasonable deadline
- follow up to ensure reviews are done
- keep the size of the document small (large documents are seldom reviewed carefully)

Longer documents should probably go through at least three rounds of reviews before they're finalized:

- initial technical review with primary subject experts
- section-by-section general review with stakeholders
- final review of completed document with key staff



Plain talker helps unclutter Indian English

By Stephen Ward
The Independent

LONDON — Britain left behind steam railways, architecture and a constitution when its rule in India ended half a century ago. A British emissary has just arrived in Madras to help clear up another, unwanted legacy from the Raj — convoluted, colonial language.

Martin Cutts, who runs the Plain Language Commission, a pressure group campaigning for clearer English, was invited by the Federation of Consumer Organizations of Tamil Nadu to clarify the wordy archaisms of English as it is still written in the Subcontinent.

Cutts, 41, went on a preparatory visit last year and collected examples from B.K. Anantharaman, general manager of the Madras telephone company. Company documents refer to "telephonic messages" rather than "phone calls." And instead of saying reminders will go out three weeks after phone bills, they state: "Notice regarding the intimation of outstanding bills will be issued by the third week of the issue of bills by registered post."

The company adds that: "Such of those subscribers who do not, however, wish to avail of this 'timely registered reminder service' can also give any alternative telephone No. to which reminder could be given."

Cutts, who has been spreading the gospel of plain English for 15 years, will talk to groups of lawyers, scientists, engineers and businessmen. "I will tell them to be careful to avoid guff, to shorten sentences as much as is practical, and to speak in an active voice.

"They all know their grammar, I found." In England, by contrast, he says he always has to spend about an hour explaining that an "active voice" means saying "I tell you" rather than "you are being told by me". But while they may all know what he means by active voice, it isn't always reflected in what they say — witness the insurance policy sales spiel which reads: "You won't even feel that you are paying the premiums — the pinch is not felt."

That at least is comprehensible. Others are impenetrable. The annual report of a Madras finance company to its shareholders, telling them the business is good at what it does and expects another profitable year, expresses itself thus: "With the specialised business of consumer durable credit, which is the main line of business of the company and the rich experience already gained coupled with an acceptable position in the various segments of the market, your directors are hopeful, barring unforeseen circumstances, to maintaining the trend both in per-

formance and profits."

He expects to spend much time reminding his audiences to be aware that English is a second language for their readers. "There is a tendency, I've noticed, particularly among the lawyers, to use words such as expediting, commencing and furnish, which are archaic and not easy to understand even in a first language."

Cutts and the British Council, which has sent him, are sensitive to the accusation that they represent a new imperialism imposing standard English on the Indians. Jane Moyo of the British Council in London explained that American English, Australian English or Indian English were all dynamic and acceptable, but the request to help write more explicably had come from the exasperated Indian consumer organisations.

The apostle of plain English makes the same point by quoting another passage from the life insurance policy, which runs: "Your employer deducts from your salary the amount of premiums and remits the same to us every month — no botheration to remember even!"

His view? "If botheration is plain Indian English, so be it."