

PAMELA E. HURLEY, PH.D

WRITING
STRATEGIES
FOR
CORPORATE
AMERICA

REAL STRATEGIES. REAL RESULTS.



Hurley
Write, INC.

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Introduction

One principle that professionals would do well to understand is that the writing they do for their company is a direct reflection of their professionalism. Let's face it: we all make judgments about a company based on the documents it produces. The underlying idea is that, for most companies, the written document *is* their deliverable and, as such, writing is a primary, not secondary, part of their jobs.

In addition, companies should provide the tools employees need to plan, write, and revise effectively, but too many don't. While any given company will train an employee how to complete certain tasks, training them to write, which is something all professionals must do, is often given the short shrift. And that's unfortunate, because poor writing affects the bottom line and wastes time and resources.

As such, this book provides a litany of "how to's"; some of the information is practical and some is theoretical, but all feeds into the larger idea that anyone can become an effective workplace writer, but that it may require us to retrain our brains. At Hurley Write, we believe that all professionals have the **critical thinking** skills necessary to create **readable, persuasive documents**; however, many simply don't know how to apply these skills to the writing process. The bottom line is that **employees with this knowledge** make their company more productive and more profitable.

The chapters in this ebook discuss how to practice and plan writing and how to think like a writer: how to analyze readers, for example, and how to focus on the outcome, or walk-away, of every document. You won't find anything about grammar here, although you will find a few chapters about style issues, such as when to use active and passive voice and how to write concisely and avoid jargon.

This book isn't designed to be read from beginning to end. Instead, we encourage you to use it as a reference. To help you find and focus on main ideas, we occasionally highlight key words and concepts (as we do in this introduction). We also provide frequent links to other articles about important subjects; the references for the book can be found at our site: www.hurleywrite.com/references.

The information we provide isn't meant to replace either instructor-led or online writing courses; rather, the idea is to introduce readers to new strategies, concepts, and techniques that ask them to think differently about how they approach writing.

If you have comments or suggestions, please email us at info@hurleywrite.com; we'd be happy to hear from you.



Pam Hurley, PhD
Founder and President, Hurley Write, Inc.

Chapter 1

How to Practice and Plan Your Writing

People usually don't expect to do things perfectly the first time. That's why we invest in lessons for everything from violin to dance to cake-decorating to golf. We know we have to practice, whether that means going to the batting cage three times a week or rehearsing a sales presentation over and over.

Writing is no different. It is a skill that can be mastered with practice.

If you struggle with writing, this bit of wisdom should encourage you: writing is not some mysterious talent that a few chosen individuals have. You can learn to do it, but you do have to practice. If you practice enough, you might actually enjoy it!

Ray Bradbury, author of *Fahrenheit 451* and dozens of other books, once declared, "Quantity produces quality. If you only write a few things, you're doomed."

Here are a few ways you can incorporate writing practice into your everyday work routine.

- **Plan everything you write.** Whether it's an email to a colleague or an incident report for your boss, take a few minutes to map out the document. Especially take time to consider your document's audience (or audiences) and purpose, and planning will become easier and more effective.
- **Ask for feedback.** Ask co-workers and other readers to offer their opinions on your documents, no matter how simple those documents are. Ask them pointed questions to see if they truly grasped your main objective.
- **Read critically.** Read reports, articles, and correspondence with a critical eye. Decide what's effective and why, and write notes in the margins. Think about how you would approach each subject differently.



Author Ray Bradbury
*recommended writing a lot if
you want to learn to write well*

Planning can take many forms, from outlining to freewriting to brainstorming. But while techniques like these are useful and important, **audience analysis** is even more crucial.

Analyzing your readers means understanding what's important to them, in terms of content, presentation, and organization, among other things.

We've found in the workshops that we've taught that many writers "write for the person in the next cube," rather than taking the time to analyze their real readers. While writing for the person in the next cube is relatively easy, it means that the writer often makes mistaken assumptions about his or her *primary* reader—the person or persons they most want to influence. In the planning stages, a good writer considers all of the following:

- **What information the reader needs and why**
- **How the reader will use the information**
- **What the reader expects of the information, in terms of both content and organization**
- **Why the reader is reading**
- **What biases/attitudes/beliefs the reader may have**
- **How the reader will actually read the document**
- **Who else might read your document besides your primary reader**

Even this list is not exhaustive, using it to prepare for your next writing task can go a long way toward making your writing more effective. In the long run, such planning will save you time: you will write more quickly, your reader will read more easily, and you will have fewer rewrites and misunderstandings.

Chapter 2

How to Improve Your Workplace Writing in Just 15 Minutes a Day

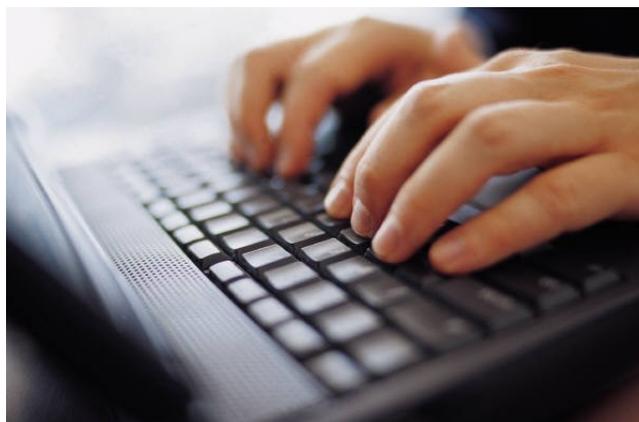
One easy way to improve your writing is by writing. Yes, it's true: writing actually improves your writing.

While not exactly a part of planning, writing every day can go a long way towards helping you improve. It makes perfect sense: mastering anything takes practice. Unfortunately, many business professionals don't practice writing; in fact, they see writing as a secondary, rather than a primary, part of their jobs. But consider this: you wouldn't go to work on Friday and expect to complete an entire week's worth of work in one day, would you? Of course not! And writing is the same: you need to work at it every day to see the best results.

Write Every Day

Experts say that you should write for no fewer than [15 minutes a day](#). As professor Katherine Black puts it, "**Write without editing in your journal for 15 minutes every day. It will change your life.**" This kind of writing-without-judging is called "freewriting." Granted, Black is a poet and creative writing professor, but whether you're writing poetry or a technical report, the idea is the same.

"Of course," you may be thinking, "you'd say that because your company teaches writing." Well, yes, we do (and we like to think we're quite good at it), but writing asks that we use our problem-solving skills and, like most skills, the more we use them, the better we get at them. Just like playing a musical instrument, cooking (okay, not in my case!), or driving, the more we flex these muscles, the more adept we become.



The best way to improve your writing is simply to write

Avoid the "I Write Better under Stress" Excuse

Since we're using our brains when we write (or should be), we shouldn't be relying on the principle of "I write better under stress." You may think you write best when you're under pressure, but chances are pretty good that you don't. If you can, begin your writing process—especially the planning—before you're up against a deadline and forced to rush. When you're rushed, you're not giving your brain the opportunity to work, and

when we rush to do anything, we're typically sloppy. Besides, if you're rushed, you can't plan ahead, and when you can't plan, you can't write well (see Chapter 1).

“15 Minutes a Day is a Lot—I Don't have that Kind of Time.”

But you do. You probably spend 15 minutes a day at the water cooler talking about the latest sports event. Keep in mind that when we say 15 minutes, we mean just 15 minutes of uninterrupted writing. When you practice writing, don't worry about grammar, punctuation, or even your topic. The idea is simply to get ideas on paper without concerning yourself with any of the other things you typically worry about when writing. If you must, get to the office 15 minutes early or stay 15 minutes late; the payoff will be tremendous. Or, write at home.

The Benefits

Setting aside 15 minutes a day, every day, to write has several positive results:

- If you have writer's block or detest writing, this encourages you to get started.
- This kind of freewriting can act as a “brain dump,” so that you get all of those unwanted ideas on paper before you begin the “real” process of writing.
- It gives you a chance to practice—and practice will make you a better writer.

You'll be amazed at the difference you'll see if you write 15 minutes a day for 15 days. Try it, and then let us know how it “changed your life.”

(For more about freewriting, see Chapter 5.)

Chapter 3

How Your Critical Thinking Skills can Improve Your Writing

Most of the professionals we work with consider themselves to be intelligent. Some even consider themselves to be brilliant! (And we have to agree!) Part of being intelligent is the ability to critically analyze; that is, to solve problems by thinking carefully about them. You use your critical thinking skills every day, all day. Whether it's deciding the best route to avoid that traffic jam or figuring out how best to communicate to your boss that you're overworked and underpaid, your problem-solving skills are always being tested.

Writing *is* problem solving. To write a workplace document, you have to figure out what information your readers want, in what form they want it delivered, how they will read the document, and what you want them to do after they finish reading it.

Writing Requires Critical Thinking

Writing, then, is not simply putting words onto a page and hoping for the best. Instead, it is a skill that requires deep thinking and lots of practice (as discussed in Chapter 2). If you view writing as a task that asks you merely to slap ideas on paper and not worry about how a document is organized or who will read it and why, you've missed the point. Real writing takes thought, time, and analysis—things that many professionals ignore because they simply want to “get it done.” To be frank, many of us devote less time than we should to our writing, because of the mindset that it's not a primary part of our jobs.

But for most of us, it *is* an important part of our jobs and, in fact, that written document is the deliverable. Consider, that **the typical college graduate spends at least 20% of his or her time writing at work, whatever the job**, and studies show that the higher you climb on the corporate ladder, the more time you're likely to spend writing.

How to Apply Critical Thinking to Your Writing

So how do you apply critical thinking skills to the writing process? This isn't as difficult as it might appear on the surface. Here, in simplified form, are some of the things you should consider:

- **Who are your readers and how will they read the document?** Will your document have more than one audience? (A proposal, for example, may be read by your boss, by your company's lawyers, and by the organization you're pitching.) Will your readers read the document in its entirety, are they skimmers, or will they read only particular sections? Figuring this out can go a long way to helping you organize and design the document.

- **What outcome do you expect?** That is, what action do you want your reader(s) to take after reading? Even if the document is informational only, there's always a response that you want from your reader; in the case of an informational document, for example, one result you may hope for is that your reader will believe that you were thorough in your research and analysis. An action may be a *reaction*. It doesn't have to be physical; it can be psychological or emotional.
- **How can you best deliver the information so that your reader understands it after the first reading?** Your goal should be to ensure that readers will have to read the message only once to get the point, even in the case of documents designed to be referred to again and again in the future.

As we've suggested, you use your critical thinking skills every day in a variety of situations; applying these same skills to your writing will help you streamline the writing process and write more effective documents.

Chapter 4

How Writing Well can Advance Your Career

The writing you do on your job affects you in a number of ways—most importantly, it can help your career.

Need proof? Mike Sisco, author of *IT Management 101*, says, “I cannot emphasize enough how much solid communication skills can mean to you. Effective communication skills are real career differentiators.” A [survey](#) by the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) found that **“67% of HR Managers said they would hire an administrator with strong ‘soft’ skills – which include communication skills—even if his technical abilities were lacking.”**

Professor Steven Reder has found that college graduates who ranked in the top 20 percent of employees on the basis of their writing skills earned more than three times as much as employees whose skills were ranked in the bottom 20%.

In 2004, The National Commission on Writing issued a report that found “more than half of all . . . companies take writing skills into account in making promotion decisions for salaried employees.”

So think carefully about how you approach and plan your writing tasks: do you view them as work you can’t wait to finish or as opportunities to shine? If the former, you may wish to rethink what writing is and how you can use it to show your colleagues and others that you understand the difference between writing and *writing*.



Studies show that good writers make higher salaries

Chapter 5

Who Has the Time to Prewrite?

“Prewriting” is what you do before you start work on the actual sentence-by-sentence draft of a document. We’ve found that many professionals use one of three prewriting strategies: outlining, “first draft equals final draft,” or modeling. In fact, however, lots of other, usually better, strategies are available, and having multiple strategies can help.

Outlining

Some professionals use this strategy simply because this is all they know, and they’re comfortable using it. The theory behind outlines is that they help the writer organize the document and keep the writer on track. The problem with outlines, however, is that, before creating an outline, the writer has to have a clear idea of what she wants to say in the document. In other words, to organize ideas, the writer has to first have generated ideas, and outlines may not be the best method to generate ideas.

Don’t get me wrong: **an outline is a great tool, but it’s not always the best *first* tool a writer should use.**

The “First Draft Equals Final Draft” Mistake

In this “strategy,” writers simply dive right into writing. They are, as we say, “putting words on the page and hoping for the best.” They have no real strategy, except to write and write and write, while thinking that what they’re writing will be the final draft—that all they’ll have to do is to correct some grammar and punctuation errors, change passive voice to active, tidy it up a bit, and the document will be ready to submit. This is an ineffective strategy because a) it’s not a strategy at all; b) it doesn’t invite you to think critically about the document and what you’re trying to achieve; and c) it limits the quality of your document, because your goal in this type of “strategy” is simply to get to the finish line, not to write a document that meets your readers’ needs or achieves a particular goal.

Modeling

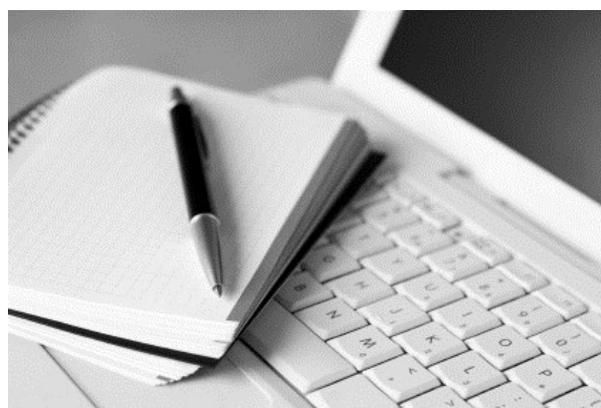
Writers “model” when they use a past report or document that either they or someone else wrote. **The problem with modeling is that it assumes the “model” was successful**—that the past report or document was well written, well organized, well researched, and properly designed for its audience. That’s a dangerous assumption. In fact, a writer rarely has a solid idea of how well the original document was received, the kinds (and number) of questions that may have been asked about it, and its overall effectiveness.

The truth is, every document should be written for a *specific* audience and a *specific* purpose, so modeling’s “one-size-fits-all” approach is unlikely to be effective. Just because the writer is creating the same kind of document for a similar reader, there is no reason to believe the same approach will work.

(Note: “Modeling” is not the same thing as using a **template**. A template is the conventional format for a particular kind of document or documents: reports look like reports and proposals look like proposals, with basically the same organization and elements each time. Templates are often useful because readers know what to expect of them and find them easy to navigate.)

Other Prewriting Strategies

The good news is that many other prewriting strategies are available, two of which are **freewriting** and **brainstorming**. Contrary to the notion that these are strategies for English majors only, they work well for all types of professionals; the caveat is that, to use them, some writers will have to be willing to try something new—perhaps even putting aside that outline for the time being.



Prewriting can save time and reduce stress

Freewriting

The advantages of freewriting are three-fold:

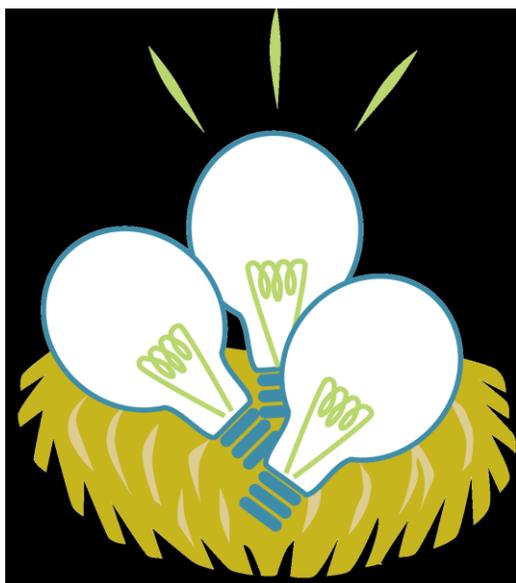
1. As mentioned, it acts as a “brain dump” and can help writers get over writer’s block. To freewrite, you simply have to write; you don’t worry about grammar or punctuation or even content. The idea is to simply get words on a page.
2. Freewriting forces you to work your writing muscles and get into the physical act of writing (which, for some writers, is a big obstacle to writing).
3. Freewriting can help you figure out what you know (and don’t) about the topic. Sometimes, we think we know more (or less) about a topic than we really do. Freewriting can help us get a much better sense of this.

Freewriting can produce brilliant ideas or garbage, but what it produces doesn’t matter because, again, the idea is to get into the physical and mental act of writing. It works well if you don’t try to control the writing, but rather let the ideas flow as they will. Some experts say that you should freewrite for a minimum of 20 minutes to get the full benefit.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is another great strategy. Unlike freewriting, in which the writer writes prose (sentences), in brainstorming the writer is listing ideas as quickly as they form, again without passing judgment on them. Sentence fragments, even single words, are fine. So are lines and arrows and even drawings, if they help suggest an idea. The point is not to question the validity of the ideas, or to ask if they're viable, or if they'll work in the final document; rather, by brainstorming, you're freeing your brain to problem-solve creatively and come up with solutions to the writing "problem."

You can create an outline after you've taken the time to freewrite and/or brainstorm; again, the idea behind prewriting is to get the ideas on paper and worry about how they're going to be organized later.



Let the Ideas Incubate

Once you've used freewriting or brainstorming or a combination of the two, let the writing incubate, or rest. That is, set it aside for as long as you can. When you come back to it, you'll see it with fresh eyes and perhaps realize that it's great or that it's garbage, or a combination of the two. **Experienced writers know that during incubation your brain is working on the document, even if you aren't physically doing so.** But incubation works only if you've actually written something.

After you've generated ideas and let the writing incubate, then consider outlining. A robust outline can help you organize your ideas, but keep in mind that outlines don't work for everyone and aren't a must.

Prewriting can save time and reduce stress. It creates a strong foundation for the draft and helps a writer more clearly see the shape and content of the final document. After prewriting, a writer can more easily pick out ideas and see how they'll fit together, rather than beginning a draft based on a faulty premise or a weak idea and realizing the mistake only after wasting a great deal of time and effort.

Chapter 6

The How and Why of Creating an Outcome Statement

Writing, as we've discussed, is all about problem solving. Most people, when trying to solve a problem, weigh their options. They may make a list of their choices and of the pros and cons attached to each, to give them something tangible to consider. Many workplace writers, however, fail to do this—especially when it comes to a central issue: what they want the document to achieve.

In the classes we teach, we often hear, “Well, the document is simply to inform.” But the reality is that any document's purpose goes beyond informing. If you're providing the reader information, you have to have a *reason* for doing so. And that's where the outcome statement comes in: it's a statement that you create for yourself that explains why you're providing the information and what you want the document to achieve.

Think of an outcome statement, if you will, as an objective coupled with a purpose statement: the objective of the document is to achieve X for the purpose of Y. For example: “The objective of this proposal is to persuade the Air Force that our company is best suited to build this airplane, so that we receive the contract to do so.” A well-written outcome statement helps keep the writer on track. That is, if you know what you're trying to achieve via the written document and why, you'll be better able to create a plan to get there.

In addition, a well-written outcome statement will help you create that all-important “**walk-away**” message. It's obvious when a document is lacking that walk-away message; for most of us as readers, it's when we get to the end and think, “Why did I just read this?” or “What is it that I'm supposed to do with this document?” At Hurley Write we call this the “and” factor, as in, “*And* what am I supposed to do with or think about this document?”

A well-written outcome statement also helps you solidify your goals for the document and therefore the action that you want your readers to take. Here's a poor example of an outcome statement: “I'm writing this document to inform my reader about X.” A better walk-away would be this: “The purpose of this document is to provide the information necessary to convince my reader that X is the correct action to take.”

Taking the time to write a good outcome statement can help your document avoid the “and” factor by keeping your document on point.

How to Think About the “Walk-Away” Message

The “walk-away” message is, of course, that all-important concept that you want your readers to act upon. Too often, writers fail to take the time to figure out what it is that they want their readers to do, think, believe, or feel after reading their document. This is like giving a presentation and not knowing what you’re going to say or why you’re saying it.

Write down that “walk-away” message before you begin writing; that is, **solidify the one idea that you want your readers to respond to, either by their remembering it or by their acting upon it.**

When we talk about “action,” we’re not necessarily referring to physical action, as in using the document to understand how to *do* something (although this could, in fact, be the action we want our readers to take, as in a set of instructions). We’re also talking about intellectual action—specifically, how we want our readers to think and feel after reading our document. For instance, if you’re writing a report for a manager about a job you’re working on or have completed, one walk-away is that you want that manager to understand that you’re doing, or have done, a thorough job; that you’re competent; and that the job is headed in the right direction and/or was done correctly.

If, as the writer, you understand and plan for this “walk-away” before you begin to write, you can create planning strategies to ensure this intellectual action. Again, this is where that outcome statement comes in handy and why it’s so crucial to take the time to write it. And it must be written down; we should avoid doing any of the planning that we’re talking about “in our heads.” Writing it down makes it real.

In sum, as a writer you need to plan, on paper, the intellectual action you want your reader to take; if you fail to plan, the reader may wind up thinking about you, your documents, and ultimately, the job you’re doing in a way you didn’t plan for or anticipate. Planning can help you control your writing, and therefore your documents, so that you get the outcome you anticipate and desire. **Before beginning to write, write down the walk-away message and the action, be it physical or intellectual, you want your reader to take.** Doing so can go a long way toward helping you get the results you desire.

Chapter 8

How to Avoid the “If I Write it, They Will Read It” Mistake

As a writer, you need to remember that readers are reading your document for a reason: they want to learn new information or how to complete a task, for example, or to understand the steps that you or your company took to solve a problem, or to discover why your firm is taking a particular action or offering its services.

When creating a document, you need to have a firm understanding of why the reader is reading *and* what the reader hopes to gain from reading. We call this the “walk-away” message—that is, the overall message of the document (see Chapter 7.) The “walk-away” message should be articulated early in the document and reiterated throughout. In other words, it’s not simply the last few words of the document; the idea is to get your readers to find reasons to agree with this walk-away message *throughout* the document.

For a message to meet readers’ expectations, the writer has to know what the reader hopes to gain from reading the document. That means that **not only must you think of your goals in writing (although that is important), but you also need to think critically and carefully about the readers’ goals.** Some of you may be thinking, “They’re reading the document because they have to.” Do they really have to? How often are readers forced into situations where they’re obligated to read what you’ve written? Rarely. Readers, just like writers, have choices, and one choice they can make is not to read at all.

Why might a reader choose *not* to read what you’ve written? Lots of reasons. Perhaps the document doesn’t meet your reader’s needs or standards: it’s too long, too wordy, too difficult to understand, or too awkwardly designed. Perhaps it simply doesn’t meet your reader’s expectations. Or all of the above.

Remember that, like it or not, we live in a world of five-to-seven-second sound bites, and readers hate to waste time. Reading habits have changed for lots of reasons, not the least of which is that information is constantly being thrown at us; thus, readers are forced to make decisions about what they read and why they read what they read.

While 10 years ago readers might have been willing to wade through a document to find the gems, today they’re not. Consider how you get most of your information these days: it’s in short snippets and often from mobile devices, which necessarily limit how much you can read in a given time and space.

The thrust, then, is that **as a writer, you have to have an explicit, targeted message that meets your readers' needs and expectations.** If you don't, your reader may choose not to read. Be sure to craft your message so that the walk-away is clear throughout the document; that way, readers won't be obligated to read the document in its entirety, but even if they don't, they will still walk away with a good sense of your walk-away message.

Chapter 9

How Writing Affects Your Business

Professional writing skills are necessary in all fields and can greatly influence your professional image. Rick Suttle, author of “[Importance of Writing Skills in Business](#),” writes, “Communication skills, including writing, are one of the most important transferable skills that workers possess.” To ensure that you’re representing yourself, and your business, in the best possible manner, you need to exercise and practice your writing skills.

Emails

Emails can be especially problematic for workplace writers: because we write them so often, we may forget the importance of carefully using language, tone, and structure. For instance, we wouldn’t use the same tone addressing our boss as we would with a peer or a subordinate in an email.



Don’t make your readers wade through information they don’t need or want to get to the point

Conciseness is especially important in emails. In a world of five-to-seven-second sound bites, readers simply won’t give you lots of time to make your point. In addition, most professionals are busy; thus, **you need to understand the main point you wish to make, and you need to make it clearly and explicitly, early in the email.** Don’t make your readers wade through information they don’t need or want to get to the point.

Professional Documents

In addition to emails, solid writing skills are crucial to ensure that you can develop and

write more complex documents such as scientific manuscripts, technical reports, grant proposals, and standard operating procedures (SOPs). These types of documents require significant planning and work and can be vital in ensuring that, for example, your organization gets funding, your work gets published, or your teams are able to work safely and produce quality products.

Although strong writing skills are the foundation for most professions, many professionals simply lack the skills they need to write effectively, whether it’s emails, grants, manuscripts, or SOPs. Practice and coaching can help them learn strategies to write more effectively and efficiently.

Chapter 10

How to Think About Both Content and Style

Which is truly important: content or style? The answer is actually both: content is only as strong as the style that you use to convey your message.

The key to being a successful writer is to employ an understandable style that clearly conveys important content. Doing this can be difficult; there are, however, a few questions that you can ask yourself throughout the writing process to help:

- **Am I using terms my reader understands?** Often in writing, we use terms and abbreviations that only we and others in our field understand. Sometimes our familiarity with, and immersion in, a field means that jargon incomprehensible to others has crept into our everyday vocabulary without our being aware of it. Be extra vigilant when assessing your use of professional jargon. Ask yourself: Will all my readers understand and use these terms in the same way that I do? Content can be obscured if writers use jargon that readers may not understand.
- **Am I maintaining a clear tone?** In addition to using appropriate terminology, we should also maintain the same tone throughout. Sometimes the actual content isn't as important as how it's conveyed. Thus, using a consistent, appropriate tone—formal or informal; serious or light-hearted; encouraging or warning—will help the reader understand the content of your document, prevent confusion, and encourage the kind of emotional response you are looking for.
- **Will my reader fully understand the purpose of the writing?** After you've completed the document, read it again from your readers' perspective: Will they understand the point and the action they're to take? Reviewing your documents in this way can help ensure that others will understand the purpose of your writing and that they'll take the appropriate action.

Remember that your writing should be reader-, not writer-, centered, and both your style and your content must serve the readers' needs.

Chapter 11

How to Achieve Readability

Good writers always look to create readability—that is, the ease with which readers can read and understand the document and take the desired action. What constitutes a readable document? Some say a readable document is one that “flows” or that is grammatically correct or that uses short sentences. In fact, readability is a bit more complicated than all that.

Meeting Readers’ Needs

While certainly flow and grammatical correctness help ensure a readable document, **what really ensures readability is that a document meets a reader’s needs for information, both in the types of content provided and in the way that content is presented.** A writer can write short sentences, for example, but that doesn’t necessarily make a document more readable than one that uses longer, more complex sentences. In fact, shorter sentences can sometimes inhibit readability by making the writer appear juvenile or simplistic. (Consider your first grade “Dick and Jane” primer, which used only short sentences because it was meant for new readers.)

Understanding Reader Expectations

To enhance readability, writers need to understand reader expectations for the document and how to correctly emphasize information. **What does your reader expect in terms of the kind of information you’re providing, how it’s provided, and how it’s organized?** Are you structuring your sentences and paragraphs so that they point readers in the right direction or are you misleading readers by using an organizational structure that’s inappropriate? Is your document designed in a way that makes it easy for the reader to navigate? If your reader expects your document to fit a certain template, have you followed that template appropriately?

Using the Topic Sentence

Remember that little gem from the seventh grade, the “topic sentence”? It’s the sentence in the paragraph that’s supposed to tell readers what the paragraph is about. **Topic sentences work well when they’re structured to show readers what they should pay attention to.** A good topic sentence ensures readability, as does putting that topic sentence in the appropriate place within a paragraph (usually near the beginning).

In short, readability is complex and involves more than simply grammar, punctuation, and writing short sentences. Writers need to understand what readers expect, how to emphasize

appropriately, and how to create something as simple as a topic sentence that's accurate and well placed.

Chapter 12

How to Use the Active Voice and the Passive Voice

Many writers get hung up on active versus passive voice. Here's an example of each:

Active voice: "We wrote the contract last month."

Passive voice: "The contract was written last month" or "The contract was written last month by us."

Some people believe that the passive voice is always incorrect, being wordy and indirect; others think the passive voice is always appropriate, as it shows impartiality or objectivity. However, both active voice and passive voice are useful, and both have their place in writing.

Use active voice when you want to reveal or emphasize the doer of the action.

For instance, in SOPs, you want to be very clear about who performs which tasks, so you'd naturally use active voice to reduce ambiguity. "[You] shut off power before servicing the machine" puts the responsibility squarely on the reader. This same sentence written in passive voice would say, "The power must be shut off by you before servicing the machine." (Most people would leave out the words "by you" here, further deemphasizing the doer of the action.) Again, active voice should be used when it's important for the reader to know who or what completed an action. We're all familiar with the line "Mistakes were made," which is clearly passive. In this case, the writer obviously wanted to acknowledge that mistakes were made while (probably intentionally) hiding the identity of the culprit.

Again, active voice should be used when it's important for the reader to know who or what completed an action. We're all familiar with the line "Mistakes were made," which is clearly passive. In this case, the writer obviously wanted to acknowledge that mistakes were made while (probably intentionally) hiding the identity of the culprit.

Use the passive voice when you don't know who or what completed the action or when that information is unimportant to the reader.

If you use the passive voice, do so ethically, which means that you don't use it to avoid assigning blame (as in the "Mistakes were made" sentence). Sometimes, of course, it just doesn't matter who completed the action. For instance, "The alloys were heated to 120° C" is fine in a scientific report because, in this case, it doesn't matter who was responsible for heating the alloys (active would be "We heated the alloys...").



For this reason, many scientific journals and scholars prefer writing about science in the passive voice; removing individuals from the documents underscores that the project is objective and replicable—it doesn't matter who performs the experiment. Keep in mind, however, that simply writing in the passive voice doesn't assure that the information conveyed is going to be seen as objective and unbiased; objectivity is conveyed, as well, via tone and style.

Use active voice when you want your readers to know who or what completed an action, because you want to assign some responsibility or accountability for the action. For instance, if you want someone to know that either your organization or your team or you yourself did something that deserves recognition, you'd use the active voice. For example: "Our company earned a place to the Fortune 500 list." Conversely, you would probably write, "The lab was blown up" (passive) instead of "I blew up the lab" (active)—for obvious reasons!

As in all aspects of technical, scientific, and business writing, the audience and purpose of the document dictate the choice of active or passive voice. Carefully consider who your readers are, what they expect of your document, and what action you want them to take. This preparation will help you use the active or passive voice appropriately.

Chapter 13

Two Simple Style Tips to Improve Your Writing

Here are two pieces of advice that will make your writing clearer, more concise, and more persuasive:

Use the Real Verb

George Orwell, in his famous essay "[Politics and the English Language](#)," discusses what he terms "operators or verbal false limbs," and what we at Hurley Write call "not using the real verb." What happens when the real verb is missing is that the writer takes a perfectly good verb and changes it into a noun or noun phrase. Changing verbs into nouns adds unnecessary words to the sentence and lessens the impact of the writing.

Two common examples of bad writing like this are "take into consideration" rather than "consider" and "have an effect on" rather than "affect." Using the real verb makes the sentence more concise, more emphatic, and more precise.

Here are two more examples (real verbs underlined):

Original: Our sales department made a decision to go into that market.

Better: Our sales department decided to go into that market.

Original: The two companies were in agreement about the contract.

Better: The two companies agreed about the contract.

Often, verbs that have been changed into nouns can be identified by the endings "ation," "ence" and "ment" (and their derivatives). And you if have words like "make," "do," or "provide" or their derivatives, you may have changed a verb into a noun phrase.

For example:

Original: "We did an assessment of our fourth-quarter expenditures."

Better: "We assessed our fourth-quarter expenditures."

Avoid Overused Phrases

In this world of texting, tweeting, and emailing, language has changed, which isn't unusual. We at Hurley Write would argue, however, that because of all this texting, tweeting, and emailing, some people have become lazier in their language usage: they're much more likely to use a cliché or overused phrase because doing so is easy and habitual.

Using clichés is problematic for a several reasons: 1) many clichés have lost their precise meaning, so we may be allowing our readers to decide for themselves what the phrase means, and that means we're not in control of the document; 2) research shows that when people read clichés their brains shut down (we have a blog about this topic); 3) our use of clichés may make us appear lazy; that is, it may seem as if we're too thoughtless to come up with a more precise and effective word or phrase; 4) we live in a multicultural society and so while a cliché's meaning may be obvious for us, the same may not be true for others. Most of you are probably familiar with the game "Buzzword Bingo," a game in which attendees count the number of buzzwords used in a company meeting (just so you know, the game is played secretly!). The next time someone claims that their product represents a "paradigm shift" in the industry, ask yourself if they really know what that phrase means.

The question, then, is this: Why do so many business writers use beaten-to-death words and phrases? Sometime it's to show that they understand the lingo of the organization they work in and that they're "in the loop." But other times it's because they simply don't think critically about the words they use and they forget that words carry weight. One of the more common examples is ending a letter with "Please feel free to contact me if you have questions." And the rest of that final paragraph goes on to elaborate on the times the reader may call and what number to use; it goes on and on and provides little in terms of important information. Understand that a reader will call even if you don't give her permission; in addition, suggesting that the reader may have questions indicates that you didn't do your job in ensuring that the document answered all questions.

The question we often get when we suggest ending with a different kind of paragraph is, as you can guess, "Well, how am I supposed to end?" And the answer is this: **End with a forward-looking statement or some statement that shows the reader that you are a thinker and that you care about *this specific document* and how it, and you and your organization, are perceived.**

We're seeing two other trends that make little sense. One is beginning an email (or other correspondence) with "Hope all is well" or "Hope this email finds you well." While some writers argue that this is an attempt to show the reader that you care or are interested in him, because it's used so often, it falls flat. I roll my eyes when I see this, as those who include it typically don't know me well (or at all). If they did know me, they certainly wouldn't begin the email with "Hope you are well." Find an opening that is sincere and that expresses your relationship with the reader; if you have no relationship with the reader or don't know the reader, avoid such an opening altogether.

As you're aware, how we structure an email and what phrase we open with may depend upon cultural norms; if you're unsure how to begin an email, consider mimicking the beginning of the email's writer. For instance, if they get right down to business, perhaps you should do the same. On the other hand, if they talk about the weather and ask about your family, consider doing the same.

Another unattractive trend is using "current" or "currently," as in "I am currently out of the office." I can figure out that you're "currently" not in the office even if you didn't use "currently" simply by the verb tense. Use "current" or "currently" only if you're comparing something historic to the present. ("Last year we used company X to clean our offices; currently we are using company Y.") I was working with a participant in one of our courses the other day and he'd used "currently" three times in one paragraph! This just reiterates the idea of critically thinking about your document.

The point is not that words (or phrases) are either good or bad, but that you should be aware that relying on overused words and phrases doesn't present your work (or your thinking) in the best possible light and may, in fact, make you appear to be less professional. In addition, research suggests that our brain shuts down when it reads clichés.

Words are neither good nor bad, but relying on overused words and phrases may not present your work in the best possible light and may, in fact, make you appear to less professional

The next time you're inclined to "utilize" "blue sky thinking" before "moving forward" with your next email, understand that using such clichéd language may make you seem lazy or, worse, may cloud your meaning. Always look to use words and phrases that make reading and understanding the document easy for readers.

Ten Surefire Ways to Improve Your Writing

1. **Plan!** Many writers don't take much time to plan; in fact, many simply begin writing, believing that that first draft will become their final draft with just a little "cleaning up" and reorganization. For writing tasks, up to 80 percent of your time should be spent planning and sometimes only 20 percent need be spent actually writing, a formula that will result in less rewriting, less revision, and less wasted time. **Consider:** Using freewriting, brainstorming, outlining, or a combination all these before you begin the actual drafting process.



2. **Figure out, in advance, your "walk-away" message.** Effective writers have a very good idea of the take-home, or walk-away, message of their document (Chapter 7.) If you don't know, and haven't taken the time to write it down, chances are good that your reader will come to a different conclusion than you want; consequently, you'll be less likely to achieve your goal. **Consider:** Writing an outcome statement that clearly indicates what action you want your readers to take.

3. **Get to know your readers.** This involves more than simply saying, "My boss Joe is my reader."

Some questions you need to ask are

- "Will Joe read the document in its entirety or will he skim?"
- "What kind of information is Joe looking for?"
- "How much knowledge does Joe have about this subject?"
- "Who else may read the document and what are they looking for?"
- "Is Joe biased or skeptical or is he on-board?"

You should be able to come up with a list of several questions that you need to answer about your reader(s). **Consider:** Using an audience rubric (a list of standardized questions) or other checklist to figure out what you need to know about your reader.

4. **Figure out how much information your reader needs.** Not all readers need all the details. It is possible to stuff a document too full of information, if that information is irrelevant to the readers' needs. Even if you feel the need to include all the information in your document for some readers, you can use writing and design strategies that emphasize the main topics and de-emphasize the details for those readers who don't want to get bogged down in the minutiae.

Consider: Using a purpose rubric or checklist to figure out what information your reader needs and why.

5. Understand reader expectations for organization, and create an appropriate organizational strategy. In other words, in addition to understanding the kind of information that Joe is looking for, you need to understand where Joe expects to find that information. How does he expect the document to be organized? General to specific? Specific to general? Chronologically? According to some standard template (e.g., your company's report format or proposal format)? There are many ways to organize a document, and the organizational strategy that you use should be based on your readers' expectations and the kinds of information you're presenting. **Consider:** Thinking about organization as a strategy to ensure that your reader will come to the conclusion you'd like him/her to.

6. Understand how your reader expects the information to be conveyed in both sentences and paragraphs. Writers have many choices when structuring sentences and paragraphs. You need to understand how readers make sense of information to structure the information in your document appropriately. Many writers mistakenly construct their sentences using the "keep it short" strategy, when readability studies clearly indicate that short sentences aren't always more effective than longer ones. Likewise, using nothing but short paragraphs can make your writing seem juvenile and your ideas simplistic. **Consider: 1)** Using a variety of sentence lengths and putting the most important information in the shortest sentences, and **2)** varying paragraph length similarly.

7. Understand the terms and words your reader expects and understands. Too many writers use the most pompous and rare words they can, thinking (subconsciously perhaps) that these words make them sound smart. The opposite may be true: readers want to read your document easily and move on; if you make them struggle to plow through fancy words, they'll think you're simply thoughtless or careless or showing off. Generally, if you can use one word rather than two or more, do; and, if you can use a one- or two-syllable word rather than a many-syllable word, do ("use" is better than "utilize," for instance, and "end" is better than "terminate"). **Consider:** Using the [Fogg Index](#) or any one of the many other readability indices available to determine how much education your reader would theoretically need to be able to read and understand your document.

8. Anticipate reader questions. Your readers may not believe the same things about the topic that you do. They may have biases (about the subject, about your company, even about you) that you need to consider. They may not understand the information you've provided in the document or even agree with it. **Consider:** Reading your document from the perspective of

your readers and/or asking someone who is less familiar with the subject than you to read and comment on your document.

9. **Know what you wish to emphasize.** Effective writing is more than just putting words on a page; it involves thinking carefully about what you wish to emphasize and why. Readability studies show that readers pay closest attention to what comes first and last in a sentence and first and last in a paragraph, for example. Knowing this can help you fashion sentences and paragraphs that emphasize the appropriate information. **Consider:** Putting the most important words first and last in a sentence and avoiding bland sentence starters such as “It is important to note,” which simply delay important information. You should also keep in mind the importance of the first and last sentences in a paragraph.

10. **Delete words that add no value.** If a word or words can be deleted and the remaining sentence still means the same thing, those words weren’t necessary. Superfluous words do nothing but cloud the message. Some obvious ones are “in order to” rather than “to” and “due to the fact that” rather than “because” or “since.” Likewise, you can almost always eliminate intensifiers (“very,” “extremely,” “really”) and deintensifiers (“rather,” “somewhat”) without loss of meaning. (An “extremely important meeting” is really no more important than an “important meeting.”) **Consider:** Using a “slash and burn” technique to eliminate all words that add no value.



How Your Documents Affect Your Company's Reputation

Your company's most valuable asset isn't a material object: it's your reputation. People will do business only with a company they trust. It's no surprise, then, that how you manage your finances, treat your customers and employees, and stand behind your products or services all influence your reputation. And there is one other factor that has a major effect on a corporation's reputation: the quality of its writing.

Writing matters. Written communications play a major role in your business. This is especially true in today's global market, in which many of us never come face-to-face with colleagues or clients. Think of how often your organization uses these documents:

- **Business documents:** email correspondence, corporate policies, training manuals, and standard operating procedures (SOPs)
- **Scientific documents:** journal articles, research reports, and grant proposals
- **Technical documents:** proposals, operational instructions, and instruction manuals

It's likely that your coworkers and customers rely on information from these documents daily. Your organization's reputation may be at risk if your team sees producing these documents as a secondary chore that distracts them from their "real" work.

Poor writing does damage. Perhaps you've dedicated extensive funds and time to bolstering your service offerings, improving your products, and hiring and training brilliant experts. Poor writing can quickly spoil all of that:

- Careless emails can confuse or even offend recipients.
- Inconsistent internal documentation jeopardizes product quality and productivity.
- Unfocused or disorganized proposals cost grants and lose customers.
- Overly complex, rambling reports leave colleagues and clients confused and angry.
- Error-riddled or carelessly worded social media posts appear unprofessional and can offend public readers.
- Muddled, wordy, and poorly designed websites frustrate and turn away users.

If your written work is rambling, vague, or filled with errors, how can your audience have confidence in your other capabilities? Poor writing not only drains your employees' energy and time, it ultimately hurts your organization's bottom line, too. Fortunately, the opposite is also true: **Ensuring that you have the skills to write clearly, concisely, and accurately can you're your company money and boost your reputation.**

How to Make Your Documents Usable

What kind of response did you get to your last technical document? Did you get an avalanche of phone calls asking for information, even though the information was in the report? Or worse, did you get no response at all?

Technical documents such as engineering reports are meant to provide answers. Organizations face serious problems when these reports fail to provide necessary information or obscure the subject. A poorly written report can leave recipients unhappy, projects delayed, and funding lost.

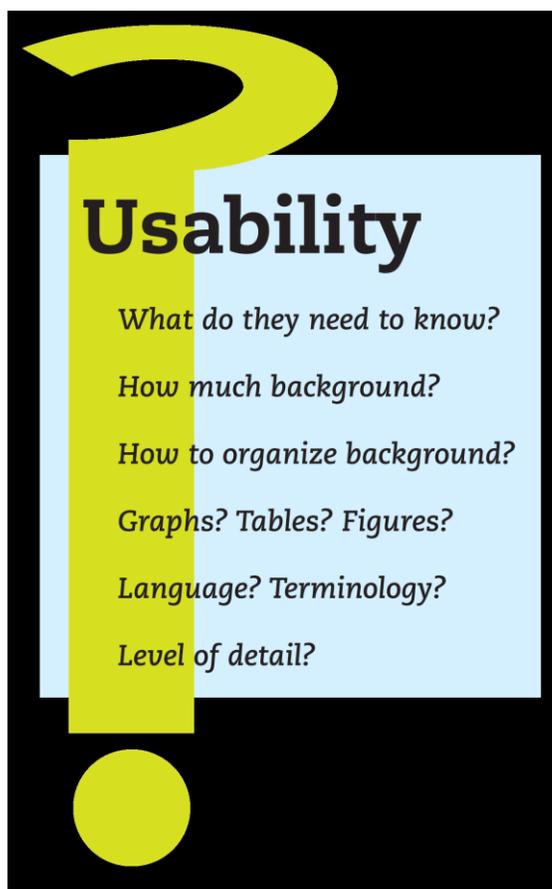
Usability is the key to effective technical documents. Although technical experts have a deep understanding of their subject matter, they also need good writing skills to translate that knowledge into usable, reader-friendly documents.

What's usability? A document created with usability in mind helps readers achieve specific goals: understanding data, for example, or seeing why a particular solution makes sense. When a document is produced without considering usability, it may be redundant, disorganized, and poorly designed. The result is a disappointed, sometimes confused or even annoyed, reader.

Usable documents make information easily available; they're straightforward, clear, and uncluttered. A successful document gives readers a clear sense of the document's purpose and a clear path toward that purpose. Usable documents save time and reduce effort for their audience.

Analyze your readers. How do you create usable documents? Start by thinking about your readers:

- What do they need to know and what do they already know? How much background should you include? How should that background be organized?



- How do your readers expect the document itself to be organized? Do they expect the most important information first? Do they expect graphs, tables, or figures? Do they expect the organization of the document to fit a known template?
- What language and terminology will best suit your readers?
- What level of detail do your readers expect?

Look again at your documents. Take a fresh look at your technical documents, keeping usability in mind. Teaching your technical experts how to analyze a document's audience(s) and purpose and how to make those analyses part of their prewriting strategy can go a long way toward helping them write clearer, more readable technical documents.

Chapter 17

How (Finally!) to Get a Response to Your Proposals

You know how much time goes into developing a proposal. All of the research, writing, and revising is worth it, presuming the proposal is successful in attracting a new client or obtaining funding. But not every proposal is a success, and few things are more frustrating than watching all those hours of hard work result in nothing.

A “thanks but no thanks” response to a proposal is painful. Worse still is finding yourself in “proposal purgatory”: You submit a proposal that perfectly captures your organization’s capabilities or your product’s benefits, and your company receives no response. Where did you go wrong? Is it the market? The competition? Can you blame it on the economy?

The answer could be much simpler: You might be talking to the wrong audience or using the wrong writing strategies.

Know your readers (and how they read). Many scientific or technological experts think only in terms of the data they’re producing and simply report their findings. They give little thought to the proposal’s *message* in terms of 1) how the information benefits the reader and his or her organization or 2) what makes the idea being conveyed in the proposal special. Sometimes writers assume that if they simply provide the data, their readers will understand its significance or benefit. This is the wrong approach: readers aren’t going to persuade themselves. Don’t make your audience work to find the purpose of your proposal.

A winning proposal begins with a thorough understanding, not just of your topic, but also of your audience. When you begin the process, ask your team, “Who’s going to be reading this and what do we know about them?” If the answer is simply “Customer X” or “Government Agency Y,” you’re already at a disadvantage. Identifying your audience means knowing who, *more precisely*, is going to read the document.

While you may not know the readers personally, by using a bit of critical thinking, you can probably nail down some of their characteristics, both in terms of how they read and what their attitude is toward you, your organization, and/or the document itself. For instance, if you know that your reader is an FDA reviewer, you already know certain things: they’re busy and (probably) multi-tasking, they’re reasonably well educated, they’re scientifically minded, and they’re under strict deadlines to get the proposals reviewed. Knowing these four seemingly insignificant things can help you fashion a document that meets their needs; if you can accomplish that, the battle is half-won.

Using such knowledge can help you understand how to use language, tone, style, organization, and document design to communicate your research in a way that's useful and engaging to the reader.

Give readers what they want. Successfully achieving this personalized appeal isn't a quick process; you should spend a significant amount of time researching your audience(s) before you begin putting together your written proposal. What types of information should an audience analysis yield? Ask yourself these questions about your readers:

- **What are your readers' needs?** Go beyond the obvious answer. The key to a successful proposal is pointing out why your service or solution is a better fit than your competitors'. If you can figure out an underlying pain point and address that, you're already making good progress. A "pain point" is simply
- **What is your readers' level of expertise?** Knowing this will determine whether you should use certain acronyms or technical terms. (Will your readers know that an ABATS is an "automated biological agent testing system," for example?) And it will help you know how much, and what, background information to include.
- **What is the audience culture?** This will help determine the tone, organization, and even graphics that you use in the proposal. A formal, bureaucratic, traditional culture (think of the old buttoned-down IBM or the FBI) will differ from a looser, more free-wheeling culture (think of all those Silicon Valley companies that have Ping-Pong tables and pet corners in their offices).
- **What will your readers do with this document?** First, how will they read it—word for word, or only skimming the headings and first and last paragraphs of each section? Second, what course of action will they take once they've read the proposal? Will they do what you want them to do?

Once you understand the audience on a deeper level like this, you can determine how to tailor your proposal content accordingly. This is where writing technique comes into play. A winning proposal is a combination of good planning and great execution. Take the time to understand your readers, but beyond that, make your proposal engaging and be sure that it shows readers the uniqueness and effectiveness of your solution.

Chapter 18

How to Write the Dreaded Abstract

If one thing is more challenging than writing good scientific and technical documents, it's summing up that content. Yes, we're talking about the dreaded abstract, that all-too-short blurb that readers use to get a snapshot of your document—and to decide whether to read it or toss it aside.

The purpose of an abstract is simple: to provide an *engaging* summary of a technical or scientific paper. For many experts, trying to sum up an entire project in 150 words or less is a Herculean task. If that statement applies to you, try these tips:

A good abstract will motivate your readers to read the document. And isn't that your goal?

- **First, write an effective document.** Sounds obvious, but as we've been discussing, much goes into writing an effective, readable document. When you know your audience and write content that is clear, concise, and engaging, summing it up becomes much less daunting. Complete the document before even thinking about the abstract.
- **Include the pertinent information.** A good abstract states the problem, approach, solution, and primary findings, results, or contributions of the document. Avoid vague or mysterious writing here: "As a result, we produced x, y, and z," not "Three results were produced" (with no statement of what those results were).
- **Leave out what's not necessary.** You don't have the space to explain your motivation for writing the document, for example, or to give readers background or data details. They'll get all that in the document itself, so leave such discussion out of the abstract.
- **Resist the urge to copy and paste.** Don't lift passages verbatim from inside your document. Readers will surely notice and judge you to be lazy or thoughtless.
- **Help online readers find you by using key words.** The abstract is often the only part of a document that is posted online, with the remainder of the content being locked down. As a result, the abstract is the target for search engines. Include terms—both specific to your document and applicable to the general subject area—that your target audience is likely to use when looking for content.
- **Be brief and get active.** We'll say it again: be direct. Include the basics and leave out the extras. Active verbs are usually best—more emphatic and concise: "We cracked the code" is better than "The code was deciphered by the project team."

- **Use reverse outlining.** Reverse outlining is a great technique for writing a good abstract or executive summary and even for helping you understand if you've written an effective document. Reverse outlining works like this: number your paragraphs, read each paragraph, and write one sentence per paragraph that articulates the main idea of the paragraph. If you can't do this without having to look at the original paragraph, you may need to rework the document.

A good abstract will motivate your readers to read the entire document, understand it clearly, and respond in the way you'd like. It can be the welcoming face of a good piece of writing.

Chapter 19

The How and Why of Developing a Style Guide

After training your writing team, create a style guide that includes the skills they've learned as well as any company-specific writing rules. For example, does your company want to spell it "ameba" or "amoeba," "analog" or "analogue"? Do you want a comma before the final item in a list? If you have a guide developed specifically for your organization, be sure that its contents are based on sound, solid research into the standard conventions in your field.

You can buy general style guides off the shelf; the *Chicago Manual of Style* is a popular choice for most book publishing and much academic writing. Most professional organizations, such as the American Medical Association, have style guides for technical and scientific writing in their own fields.

The sooner you have a standardized style guide, the sooner you'll see improvements in your staff's documents and the sooner your staff can spend less time fixing writing problems, answering repetitive questions, and addressing inconsistencies in your organization's documents.

Remember, the documents that you produce are the face of your organization. Standardized training and a reliable style guide will help you present that face to the world in a fresh, consistent way.

Once you create the style guide, be sure that your team is trained on how to use it and ensure that they know where to find it. Conduct trainings on it and its use at least once per year and ask for input from those who use the style on its usability for their writing tasks. While this may seem obvious, many participants in our classes are unclear if their organization has a style guide and if they do, where to find it.

Ensure that the style guide is a living document; that is, that it changes as your organization evolves.

Chapter 20

The Four Types of Business Documents

Effective communication skills lead to more efficient business and professional writing. As Barbie Carpenter, author of [“Four Types of Communication in Business Writing,”](#) writes, “Sound business communication styles improve interoffice communications, encourage success among employees and improve the bottom line. Understanding different business writing styles helps improve overall business documentation.”

Carpenter focuses specifically on the following four types of written communication:

Results-Oriented Communication

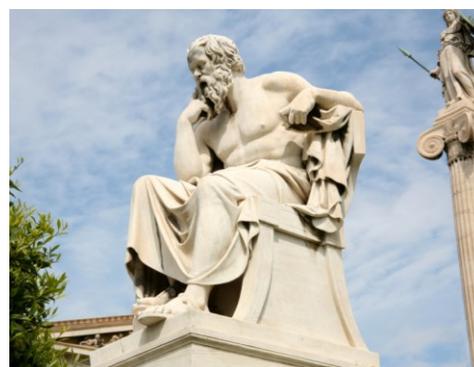
Results-oriented communication is used, as the name suggests, when you’re aiming for a specific output or result. For example, it might be used when inquiring about test results or requesting a promotion. “Results-oriented business writing is marked by active voice,” writes Carpenter, “encouraging the reader to do something.” This style should include specific information to drive the intended results and should be easily understood by your target audience.

Informational Communication

The intended result of many documents in business writing is primarily to inform. This type of writing, like all forms of communication, requires clarity, completeness, and conciseness. In addition, because some readers need information quickly or have a short timeframe in which to read the document, being brief may also be important.

Persuasive Communication

All writing, according to Aristotle, is persuasive, an idea that we at Hurley Write preach. What this means is that your written documents are designed to drive your readers to think or act in a certain way. To accomplish this, think critically and carefully about your readers, the actions you want your readers to take, and why your readers are reading. Remember, **readers are most interested in how the communication affects them.**

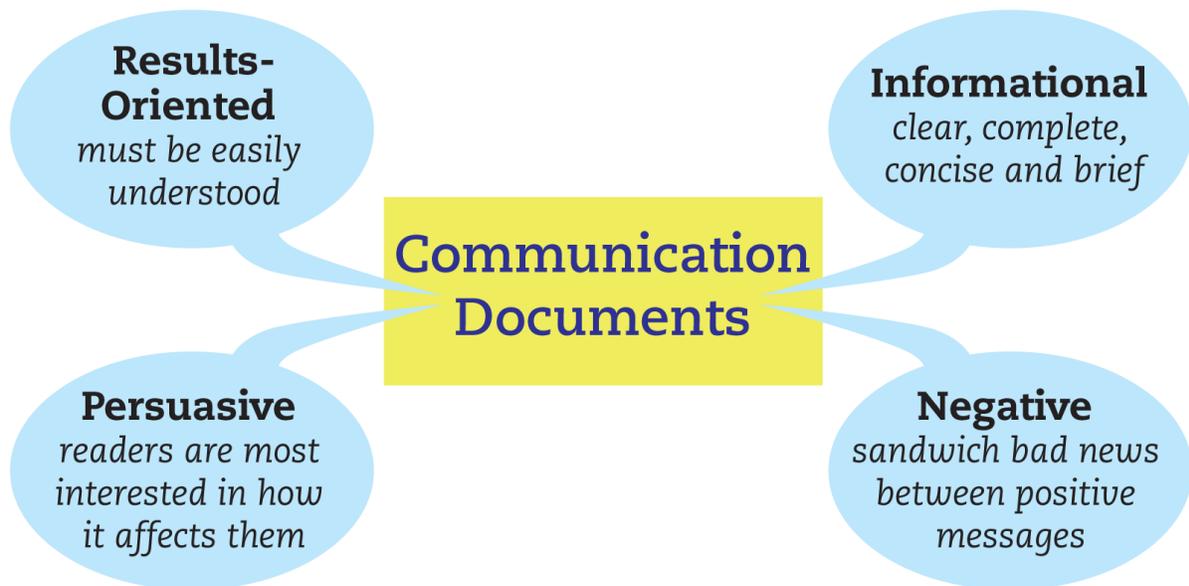


According to Aristotle, all writing is persuasive

Negative Communication

Sometimes businesses have to write negative documents—documents that deliver bad news to readers. Writing such documents without

alienating your readers or having the document reflect negatively on you or your business is key. To ensure that the reader isn't left with a negative impression, use the "sandwich" technique: **begin with a sincere positive statement, follow with the negative information (phrased positively), and end with a positive statement.** Be clear and explain the reasoning behind your position, while using a sympathetic tone.



Chapter 21

Four More Tips to Improve Your Workplace Writing

Imagine sitting down to work at the start of the day, opening your email, and finding something that looks like spam: it's full of typos; poor grammar; and long, rambling digressions. And worse, maybe it's meant for someone else even though it was just sent to the entire department. Instead of starting the day productively, you've just wasted both time and brain power on a useless document.

Writing well is part of being a professional. Whether you're working for a small start-up or a multinational company, writing that comes across like a spam email can waste time, breed resentment, and damage your credibility. If you're looking for ways to improve your workplace writing and get ahead in your job, try these four tips:

1. **Know your “why.”** Simon Sinek, a well-known author with the RAND Corporation, speaks extensively of the value of knowing why you do what you do. Knowing why you write can also help shape the finished product. Take time before you start writing to establish why you're writing this document at this time; who will read it; and what you want them to learn, consider, or do as a result of reading.
2. **Put yourself in your readers' shoes.** You know what *you* want to get out of the process, but what about your audience(s)? What do they hope your document will provide them, and can you deliver that? What do they not care about? What do they already know, and what do they want to discover?
3. **Craft your document's organization carefully.** How you put information down on the page matters. Lead your reader through a logical structure and help them connect ideas and remember the material; there are various organizational strategies you can use to do this.
4. **Be comfortable with the idea of revision.** Most people, regardless of what they may believe about their own writing skill, can't produce a perfect document on the first try—and shouldn't expect to. Editing and revision are part of the writing process. Don't think of them as “extra work” that you do because you've somehow failed the first time. They aren't a mark of failure; they're keys to success.

Chapter 22

Four Reasons to Invest in Employee Writing Courses

These are tough economic times, and companies want to cut, not increase, costs. That means that training programs aren't high on the list of priorities for many right now. But employee writing courses deserve special consideration.

Did you know

- **Employees may spend half their time at work communicating through writing.** This may include [reading and writing emails](#), generating memos, coordinating an instant messaging service, and handling reports. Improving that process means that more work can get done in a day, but when employees can't communicate well, misunderstandings and requests for clarification lead to wasted time and effort.
- **Many supervisors spend too much time [proofreading and editing documents written by their team](#).** That's a triple-punch to your operating efficiency: it's additional work hours spent on fixing documents, it's time your supervisors don't spend supervising, and it's a sure way to increase employee discontent.
- **Most colleges don't focus on writing skills.** Even though writing and communication skills are essential for business, most colleges and universities require only basic composition skills. According to a [recent study](#) by staffing firm Adecco, 44 percent of recent college-graduate applicants possess lackluster soft skills, including communication skills, critical thinking, and creativity. Employee-writing courses are a way to fill in that missing skill set.
- **Even employees who write well may not know the most efficient ways to go about it.** In fact, surveys suggest that almost three-quarters of writers think they could make better use of their writing time. Streamlining the writing process by knowing [how to brainstorm, organize, draft, and revise](#) equates to greater efficiency, and more time to focus on other tasks.

If you want to maximize your training ROI, avoid teaching extraneous skills, and focus in on the most valuable skill for each employee's position, [customized writing courses](#) are the way to go. **A lot of writing advice is universal, but the skills necessary to write well aren't one-size-fits-all.** A project manager might need to show technical writing skills while wrangling a group of engineers; a media spokesperson, on the other hand, would need to have his/her presentation skills and conversational writing voice down pat.

Many people are familiar with the [university model of courses](#): A professor creates a syllabus, the syllabus is approved, and a class self-selects (to some extent) their participation. Effective training works on a different model: employees and managers themselves determine what content needs to be covered in response to actual needs. And instead of college "prerequisites," **a workplace-writing instructor should evaluate the company's output, not only to look for areas of improvement, but also to gauge the criteria for success.** A company whose major output is subcontracted manufacturing work, for example, has a much different goal for their training than an entertainment hub.

On the company side, managers and employees should look at scheduling customized writing courses for small groups of related job roles. Some information, such as communicating effectively in email, may offer company-wide improvements. Other courses lend themselves more narrowly only to certain positions. In those cases, scheduling [different courses for different positions](#) may be wiser than scheduling one large course for everyone.

Remember: skilled employee writing supports your public image and improves your internal operations, both of which can have a measurable positive effect on your bottom line.

Seven Tips for an Effective Presentation

In some ways, creating a brilliant written work is easier than pulling off a brilliant in-person presentation. With a document, you can spend hours or days [revising, editing, and proofreading](#). With a presentation, no matter how much practice you put in, you still have just one chance to get it right.

As with most things, practice makes perfect, and knowing the guidelines of an effective presentation can help. Keep these seven [presentation tips](#) in mind the next time you have a captive audience:

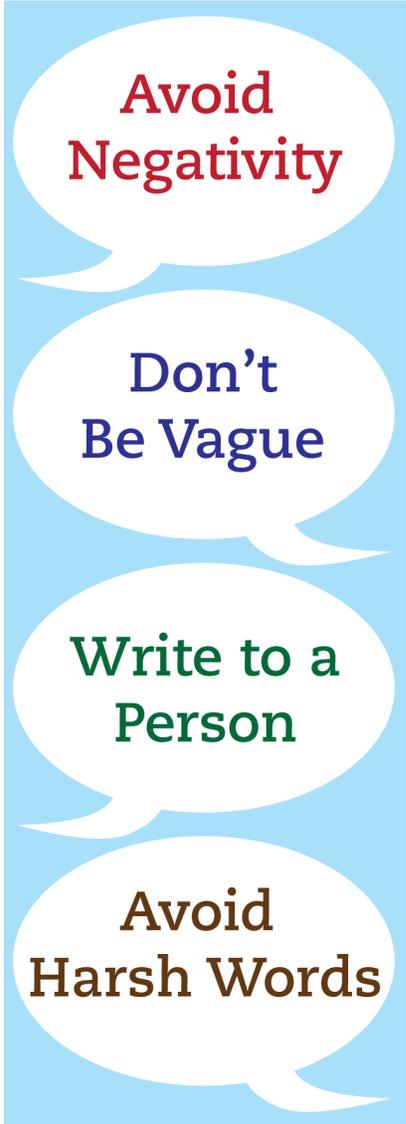
1. **Know your listeners.** Just as in writing, if you can connect to your audience's expectations, demands, and previous knowledge, you can foster engagement. Understand what your listeners hope to learn from the presentation.
2. **Get to the point.** Brevity is the soul of wit—and memorability. To the extent possible, hit the highlights fast and don't belabor the material.
3. **Make it relevant.** Tie the topic of the presentation to real issues your listeners face and, when appropriate, use examples and anecdotes to make the material memorable. People remember stories better than they remember facts, and a week later, you want people to still remember your presentation.
4. **Pay attention to the flow.** [Move your presentation](#) logically from point to point so you're building and reinforcing a coherent argument. Clear, explicit transitions can help with this.
5. **Use visual aids, but use them sparingly.** Illustrate your points, but don't force the audience to split their attention between listening to you and reading a slide. If your graphics speak for themselves, don't waste time interpreting them.
6. **Practice your presentation, and record yourself when you do.** Review your speaking time, listen to your pacing and inflection, and work on your body language. Aim to speak clearly and at a measured pace, and keep your body language open, friendly, and confident.
7. **Solicit feedback!** Whether it's from a speaking coach, a friend, or a past audience member, learn how you can improve your performance.

Four Ways Not to Communicate with Co-Workers

There's a hidden cost to having a workplace where employees don't feel valued or welcome. They want higher compensation for staying. That means that a brilliant manager with a short temper and a tendency to berate direct reports isn't just an office fixture to shrug off. In fact, he may be single-handedly driving up costs. Sometimes fixing the problem is a simple matter of improving communication skills.

Whole [communications courses](#) can and have been designed for effective workplace communication. Usually it's best to put ideas in positive form, but here, just for a change, we'll break that rule. When it comes to workplace communication, then, here are four things *not* to do:

1. **Don't focus on problems and negatives, or use negative language.** Instead of saying "Your design is terrible," try "I'd like to discuss ways to improve this design."
2. **Don't be vague.** "There's a problem with your report," or "I don't think you understood what I wanted" doesn't illuminate the problem or provide a way for the employee to improve. Try to make your workplace communication more specific: "I wanted to see five to 10 pages of analysis on this topic, not background. [Could you revise](#) with that in mind?"
3. **Don't assume that you're writing to a computer screen or a sheet of paper.** Even in an environment where most interaction takes place via [email or instant message](#), a *person* is on the receiving end of your communication, unless your company works with very advanced Artificial Intelligence! Written communication—on paper or online—insulates you from seeing the immediate emotional impact of your words, but that impact is still real and can affect future interactions. Avoid language and tone that may, without your physical presence to lighten the situation, cause bad feelings in your reader.



**Avoid
Negativity**

**Don't
Be Vague**

**Write to a
Person**

**Avoid
Harsh Words**

4. **Don't use offensive language.** This doesn't just mean profanity. You should avoid accusatory and insulting terms like "screwed up" and "blew it" as well.

Managing the tone of your workplace communication can help foster a productive work environment, and keep employees around.

How to Write an Executive Summary

Lots of writers get confused when they're faced with writing the executive summary; indeed, many writers end up including too much or too little information.

As always, when we consider the documents we write, we must think about 1) function: what are they supposed to do and 2) readers: who's reading them and why?

The executive summary is simply the document in miniature; experts suggest that it should be no more than 10 percent the length of the original document and should be easy to read and understand, as it's typically read by those who will not read the entire document.

Things to consider:

1. **Write it for someone who is unfamiliar with the topic.** The reason for this approach is because the person reading it may not have the same familiarity and if we can write our executive summaries for that lay person, we're ensuring that it can be read and understood by numerous audiences.
2. **Use simple language.** That means avoiding technical jargon, pompous language, and terms your reader may be unfamiliar with. Why? Because again, the idea of the executive summary is that it can be read and understood by someone unfamiliar with your field.
3. **Consider using subheadings.** Subheadings can make it easy for readers to find information. Examples might include "Problem" "Methodology" "Solution," or whatever subheadings make sense for your readers. Again, keep in mind that they're to be used to help your readers find information that they wish to read or, in some instances, skip. Just be sure that the headings clearly indicate what each section includes.
4. **Use reverse outlining.** Many writers simply don't have an idea of what to include and so end up copying and pasting information; this is a mistake, as it leads to an executive summary that's choppy and unfocused. Instead, use reverse outlining: simply number your paragraphs, read each one, and then, without looking at the paragraph, write one statement that articulates what the paragraph is about. This technique should show you what's important and what's not.

5. **Organize in order of importance.** While you can organize the executive summary in the same order as the document, studies now indicate that beginning with the most important information is best, as many readers simply won't read the entire executive summary.

Writing a good executive summary isn't difficult if you understand the function of the executive summary, how it's going to be used, and what you wish to emphasize.

References

References are available at www.hurleywrite.com/references