

# Scientists at ConAgra Foods improve the clarity of reports and proposals by enlisting the help of Hurley Write.

## Background

ConAgra Foods is a global leader in the consumer food products industry. Since 1919, the company's focus on research, quality, and innovation has earned it multiple awards and recognition. ConAgra Foods' reputation relies on continual study and creation of quality branding and food products by its skilled, diverse workforce.

## Challenge

Developing clear, concise documents is a crucial skill for the scientists at ConAgra Foods. Ashley Malchow, associate microbiologist for corporate microbiology, performs routing testing for the company's manufacturing facilities and conducts research in challenge and shelf-life studies for new and current products. These tasks are an important part of ConAgra Foods' food-safety initiatives, and Malchow must clearly communicate about them. Her protocols, reports, and project proposals all depend on strong writing skills. Any report or protocol that she creates must be clear enough that other microbiologists can understand or even recreate her projects. "My biggest challenge," says Malchow, "has been writing to multiple audiences. I've always aimed to please the first reviewer, then edit as the draft was passed from person to person. That approach led to sentences being taken out and added back in later according to the personal preferences of each reader."

## Solution

Hurley Write, Inc., a certified women-owned business, has been teaching customized writing courses for more than 25 years. ConAgra Foods took advantage of Hurley Write's proven track record to help its employees develop a reliable writing process. Pam Hurley, Ph.D., founder of Hurley Write, created an onsite course tailored to participants' specific writing issues and internal scientific documents. Malchow chose to focus on the three topics she found most important in her work: critical thinking, developing a writing strategy, and organizational strategies. "I choose those three topics because I think they are the very foundation of good writing," she says. Participants practiced new concepts and polished unused skills by revising early drafts of internal reports that they had submitted. One of Malchow's reports happened to be included. "This actually ended up being the best feedback," she says. "Not only did the instructor comment on what could be improved, but others also spoke about certain aspects that I had never thought about. This was a prime example of not catering to my audience. It was eye opening."

Malchow was pleased that the workshop exceeded her expectations. "Well organized" and "comfortable," the session offered concepts that "were easy to follow and demonstrated how writers create scientific reports from beginning to end," she notes. Malchow also appreciated the open, communicative atmosphere fostered by Hurley Write. "Anyone could throw out ideas or answers without judgment," she recalls. "Outspoken people had a chance to voice their opinions; the more reserved could take notes and ask questions during breaks. The instructor always made sure that the concepts made sense to the participants before moving to the next topic."

## Result

After completing the Hurley Write course, members of the ConAgra Foods team are more confident in their writing abilities. Now, Malchow knows how to look at her writing with an objective eye. She also feels that her writing is more clear and concise. "I always just tried to get by with the basics of a report," she says, "but now I can incorporate ways to think critically and organize the report structure while keeping my audience in mind." She uses her newfound skills in multiple ways: writing reports, recording work instructions, or constructing email messages. "My writing is more structured," Malchow confirms. "I try to plan ahead and implement different techniques. I don't think I have changed how I work with others directly, but I did stop and slow down to think about how my writing can affect others' opinions and viewpoints."

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**Ashley Malchow  
Associate Microbiologist, ConAgra  
Foods**

### Key Benefits

Ability to apply critical thinking skills to writing

Individualized attention and constructive feedback

Improved clarity and organization of scientific reports

Development of a reliable and repeatable writing process

Increased proficiency to produce documents that meet the needs of multiple audiences