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1 Setting the Stage for Writing

- Focus on**
- ▶ **The benefits of seeing writing as a process that involves planning, drafting and revising**
 - ▶ **Techniques to analyse the reader audience and adapt your writing accordingly**
 - ▶ **Techniques to generate ideas and plan for a written task**

▶ Introduction

Writing is a skill that is acquired through conscious and persistent effort: it is not an instinctive skill that we are born with. There are several reasons why writing is more complex than speaking. One reason is that it is separate from any form of physical interaction: the writing process can take place at a totally different time and place from the reading process. This is why writers must try to perceive their text from the readers' point of view and write in a way that is clear and relevant to their audience. Another reason is that writing is thought-active. The simple fact that you want to write about a topic triggers thought processes that give this topic a particular shape out of a range of alternatives. To use a computing metaphor, your mind reconfigures the topic in a way that allows it to be downloaded in a written form. This then influences the direction your text will take. If this direction is unsatisfactory, you have to think about the topic differently, this way re-shaping it and re-orienting it. The changes that take place from thinking to writing are why many novice writers complain that their final result is not what they initially wanted to express, or that what they mean comes out differently on the written page.

Because of the complexity of written communication, a successful written text does not emerge spontaneously, but requires considerable preparation and revision. Even a brief memorandum may require more than one draft. And although much business and technical writing follows standard formats

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and phrases, each task presents a new problem to solve with a unique audience and situation. This chapter looks at some major, tested, techniques for creating written documents quickly and efficiently, from concept to delivery copy. We focus on the idea-generating aspects of writing, through to the organisational and analytical skills that develop through careful revision and editing.

The techniques discussed here are not the only way to write; there are almost as many variations of the writing process as there are writers. If you already have a successful practice for writing that produces first class results, you have no reason to vary it. However, if you often get stuck when attempting written tasks, or fail to communicate effectively what you intend, the guidelines offered here will prove very valuable.

In order to proceed confidently with written tasks, think of writing as consisting of three stages: the planning or conceptualising stage, the drafting stage and the revising stage. In contrast to what is commonly believed, it is the first and third stages that require the most time and attention. You will find that by having a clear vision of what you want to accomplish (stage one), and giving yourself adequate time to re-phrase, delete, re-arrange and add information to sections (stage three), you are creating your work. The drafting stage is just a bridge between careful planning, and structuring information. All well-prepared professional documents require this process of writing, although the time assigned to each stage varies depending on the length and significance of the document.

► Planning

The first thing to do when planning a written task is to make sure you understand what the task requires. Ask yourself what the purpose of the document and your intended result are. This will determine how ready you are to write (how much planning and research you need to do), and, if the task does not specify, what document format would be most appropriate. Would a memo be suitable or would you need to produce a full investigative report? Having a clear idea of the *audience*, *purpose*, and *format* of your document is a vital step in producing successful written communication. In particular, ask yourself the following questions:

- What do your intended readers already know?
- Why will they read this document?
- What do they need to know? What do they *not* need to know?

- How much detail do they need? How much of the big picture do they need?
- What purpose is the document serving? For example, does the document inform? Analyse? Clarify? Persuade? Will it be used as the basis for a decision?
- What is the standard way of presenting the information your audience requires (what are they expecting to read)? Is there reason to vary this format?

Audience adaptation and audience dynamics

Every act of writing takes place in a new context, with a unique time, place or reader to take into account. 'Audience adaptation' refers to the skill of arranging words, organising your thoughts, and formatting your document to best achieve the effect you are aiming for with your target audience. 'Audience dynamics' refers to the relationship that writers form with their readers through their style, and through the amount and structure of information they provide. The audience dynamics are good when the readers get a sense of satisfaction that the questions raised in the text were relevant to their interests, and the answers or solutions provided were convincing. In contrast, audience dynamics are bad when the readers feel frustrated or offended because the writer's tone is patronising, the answers or solutions provided are simplistic in relation to the complexity of the questions, or the argument is emotive and based on generalisation. To maximise your ability for effective audience dynamics, assess the reader's needs, knowledge and interest by conducting an audience analysis before writing.

Advertising and marketing executives, who have a strong interest in influencing audiences and who, therefore, conduct extensive research in mass perceptions, take into account five factors of audience analysis:

- technical background
- status
- attitude
- demographics
- psychographics

Technical background refers to the readers' knowledge (or lack of knowledge) in the topic that you are writing about. How much technical terminology should you use

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to avoid sounding either too condescending or too obscure? Should you begin with the big picture to put the reader into perspective, or go straight to the details that you want to focus on? Are you writing to people of the same educational background as yours (i.e. your peers), or to those of different training?

Status refers to the writer's degree of authority and/or power relative to the reader. Are you writing to your boss, to a group of peers, or to someone who is junior to you? Is your reader a client with whom you intend to continue doing business, or the general public that you can only see from a bird's eye view? Are you an expert presenting information to a non-specialist audience, or a novice showing to an authority how much you know about a subject?

Attitude refers to the state of mind you expect the readers to be in when they read your document. Will your message find them hostile, neutral or positive? How motivated are they to read your document? Are you proposing revolutionary changes to a situation you think your readers will resist changing? Are you informing them of a breakthrough that will undoubtedly improve the quality of their lifestyle?

Demographic analysis works on the principle that the population can be grouped, and that each group shows a tendency to think or behave in broadly similar ways. Demographic characteristics include the following:

- gender
- occupation
- social class (i.e. income level)
- age
- location/nationality (i.e. international or local audience)

From a person's demographic profile, certain inferences can be made about their degree of knowledge, expectations and aspirations, though they are not always foolproof. For example, in most Western societies a middle-class white woman is probably educated to upper secondary school or tertiary level – but not necessarily. Also, teenagers are not likely to be classical music fans, but, again, this may not be so.

Psychographics refers to the lifestyle, values and social self-image that the readers are likely to have. Marketing research shows that people are favour-

able towards products and services that they see as representative of themselves. Similarly, your readers will respond differently to your message according to their values. What are their interests, opinions and hobbies? Demographic and psychographic analyses are especially relevant in journalistic and public relations writing, where you are addressing a wider public.

Your audience analysis will determine your choice of *content* (what and how much information you need to give) and *style* (how you will present this information). Style will be examined in more detail in Chapter 4. Here it suffices to say that it refers to the emphasis you put on certain ideas and the tone that you adopt in relation to the information you present: your overall attitude and approach as this manifests in the language you use. Your style is formed through your word choice and sentence structure. So, following the results of your audience analysis, you may decide to show a lighthearted approach through your writing – or maybe an evaluative one, or serious, or pompous, or respectful.

In all, for a text to be successful, there must be **writer–reader complicity**. In other words, the readers must feel that the writer is on their side, supporting their interests and respecting their needs. If readers feel that a writer treats them as an example of a general category, rather than as specific individuals or a specific company, they are more likely to resist accepting the information given.

For example, the following text comes from a government information leaflet telling employers about laws governing sexual discrimination and equal opportunity. It is tactless and creates bad audience dynamics because, by grouping all employers into one category, it implies that the readers may be practising gender discrimination. Also, it fails to bring in the main topic (the Equal Opportunity Act) till the very end, when there is actually no space to give any information about it.

Sexual discrimination is practised by various employers, in retail, small business, industry and corporate environments in a number of parts of the country; it is an important community problem and a direct cause of considerable personal distress.

As an employer, as a Human Resources Officer, or as a business owner, it is important for you to know about the Equal Opportunity Act 1975.

Here is a revised version, which creates more complicity between the issuing authority and the readers by addressing the readers directly and showing them that the information given is for their benefit. Also, this version has improved

presentation and appearance by including a title and bullet points, and by introducing the main topic earlier.

Employers and the Equal Opportunity Act

You can play an important part in preventing sexual discrimination if you are responsible for employing staff in

- retail
- small business
- industry
- corporations

The Equal Opportunity Act has been legally enforced since it was passed by Parliament in 1975. This Act makes it illegal for anyone to discriminate – to treat people unfairly because of their gender, race, colour, descent, or ethnic origin.

If you know of anyone in your business environment who rejects a suitable candidate for a position because of their gender, tell them about the Racial Discrimination Act. You can also ask the Commissioner for Community Relations if you need further help.

These factors of audience analysis will become increasingly familiar and relevant as you progress through the book.

Forming content

After analysing your audience and determining the purpose and format of your document, it is time to think about the content. This is where researching and thinking come in. Depending on the audience and purpose, different types of research will be relevant. For example, you may decide that interviewing would supply you with essential facts; or you may decide that doing a historical research on a topic would be more suitable; or perhaps a combination of methods would help (more on research in the next chapter).

Collecting facts, however, is not sufficient. You need to think about the significance of these facts and to interpret them. This is where your skills of analysing ideas (tracing their constituent elements), and synthesising them (evaluating their significance in a given context) come in. The process of generating ideas tests your capacity for critical and creative thinking: your ability to imagine all possible aspects or factors of a problem. Analytical thinkers do not simply arrive at the most obvious solution to a question; they test out a range of possible answers and keep an open mind. As

happens with chaos theory, sometimes information that initially seemed irrelevant proves to be the key. To be able to trace analogies between seemingly disparate topics and to suggest innovative solutions are skills highly sought in corporate environments. In fact, at the cutting edge of many industries and business endeavours, you will find individuals who are not only highly motivated and organised, but also creative and versatile in their thinking.

The following are some ways to generate ideas. Try them and see which combination suits you.

Brainstorming

Having done some research, list all the ideas that come to your mind randomly about a particular topic. Brainstorm by writing single words, phrases, or full sentences – whatever comes to mind. Many writers find that brainstorming in groups is particularly productive.

Mind mapping

Mind mapping is similar to brainstorming but more visual and less linear. Create mind maps by:

- starting with a word or image central to your topic;
- placing it in the middle of a big sheet of paper and drawing a line radiating out from it to a major subdivision of the topic;
- circling that subdivision, and drawing a line radiating out from it to a more specific subdivision;
- continuing the process until you run out of ideas.

Mind mapping is especially useful to those who find it easier to assimilate and understand schematic information than linear or sentence-based reasoning. For example, Figure 1 is a mind map of the structure of Chapter 8 of this book.

Journalist questions

Journalists' questions begin with what is known as the '5Ws and 1 H' interrogatives:

Who?

What?

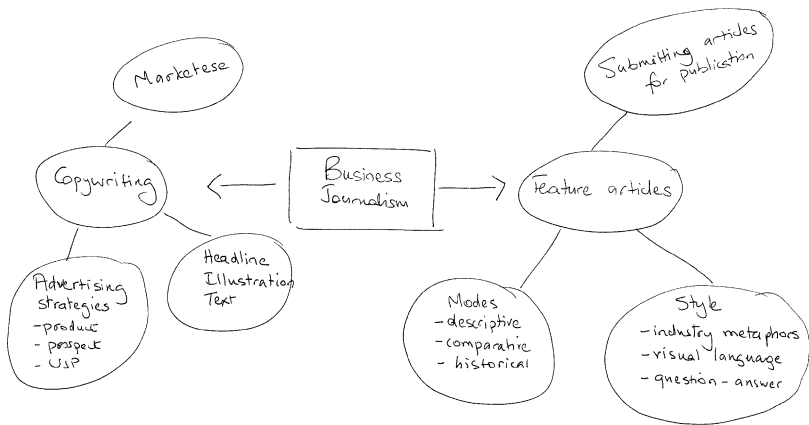


Figure 1 Mind map

Where?

Why?

When?

How?

You can approach your task by listing as many journalists' questions about your topic as you can. Questioning encourages you to look at a topic from many different perspectives, and may help you to narrow the issue that you are investigating. Journalists' questions are especially useful when your task involves much factual information (as happens, for example, in investigative journalism), because they actually force you to answer them by providing specifics rather than open-ended or ambiguous statements.

Bouncing ideas

Bouncing ideas means talking about your project to someone. The aim here is to listen to yourself talk about your task, so it doesn't matter if your interlocutor is versed in your topic or not. In fact, some writers find that talking about their topic to someone who is a total outsider helps them to clarify issues.

If you are having trouble solving a particular problem, talk about why you are having trouble. Variations on this method include talking to yourself or talking into a tape recorder, which has the advantage of capturing your

thoughts exactly. Some people are most productive in generating and developing ideas when they can move around and create *kinetic energy*.

Scientific categories

If your topic involves interpreting a scientific development or process to a non-specialist audience, consider presenting it in terms that answer all or a combination of these questions:

- Existence** For example: How can the existence of X be shown?
- Quantity** For example: How large/small is X? How fast?
- Comparison** For example: Is X greater/less than Y? In what ways is X different from Y?
- Correlation** For example: Does the speed of X vary with its weight?
- Experience** For example: If X occurs, will Y also occur? How do we know?

These categories are especially useful for writers who are involved in laboratory experiments and the publication of scientific findings. The reason for this is that they encourage answers that may be empirically tested.

Overcoming 'writer's block'

If you find that it is difficult to generate ideas about a specific topic, leading to annoying and costly delay, try these two 'unblocking' techniques. **Free-writing** offers one method of clearing and opening your mind. You can free-write by writing non-stop, on any topic, for a specific length of time. Do not stop to edit or evaluate what you are writing, and, if you cannot think of anything, keep repeating your last word or phrase until you get going again.

The point of freewriting is to unblock your thought processes, and put you in the mood to express ideas in writing. The topic or relevance of what you are writing is, at this stage, put aside. Many writers find that freewriting allows them to approach their task in an uninhibited way.

Similar to freewriting is **writing to the resistance**. This means writing about why you are having trouble tackling a task, or why you are being frustrated in your investigations. This process may help you break through a puzzle, or identify more clearly what it is about the forms of evidence you are dealing with that makes them difficult. Writing to the resistance works in cases of writer's block or when you feel so perplexed by a topic that you find it difficult

to write about it in a systematically logical way. It may help you to trace a rational pattern in chaotic thinking.

Organising and outlining

After you have researched the subject, generated ideas and are familiar with your topic, it is time to organise your ideas in a form that will lead to a first draft. For longer documents such as reports, an effective way of doing this is to classify your information under headings. It is often more practical to do this in a spatial arrangement rather than in a linear, sequential order. If working manually, write each heading on a separate page and keep adding information in phrases, sentences or bullet points under each heading. If working on a computer, create a folder for each project, and keep each heading or major idea in a separate file, adding information in turn to each file. If you find you have more information than headings, or facts that do not fit under a particular heading but are still relevant, revise the headings.

This type of spatial outlining is similar to the technique of *storyboarding* used in multimedia or video projects. Small screens are drawn on a page, capturing the main visual elements of major scenes in a project. Under each screen is some script describing the main action and indicating any areas that need to be developed for the particular scene. In the case of writing, the screen is replaced with a descriptive heading. Spatial experimentation can help you find a logical order in which to present your ideas. Do not delete documents or files until the project is finished, because you may find that information you thought was redundant becomes relevant again at a later stage. For example, Figure 2 is a storyboard outline of some chapters of this book, done before any drafting of content took place. The outline distributes topic headings in chapters without, at this stage, considering the sequence of chapters or sections.

In the last stage of outlining, give your outline a linear sequence. Decide on the order of information that would communicate your message most effectively to the target audience and shuffle your headings accordingly (details on distributing information are in Chapter 5). You should now be ready to write comfortably and confidently.

► Drafting

When drafting, you will often find that much of your planning will change. Drafting is really putting to practice the ideas you generated in the previous stage and seeing if they work in expanded form. Therefore, at this stage of the

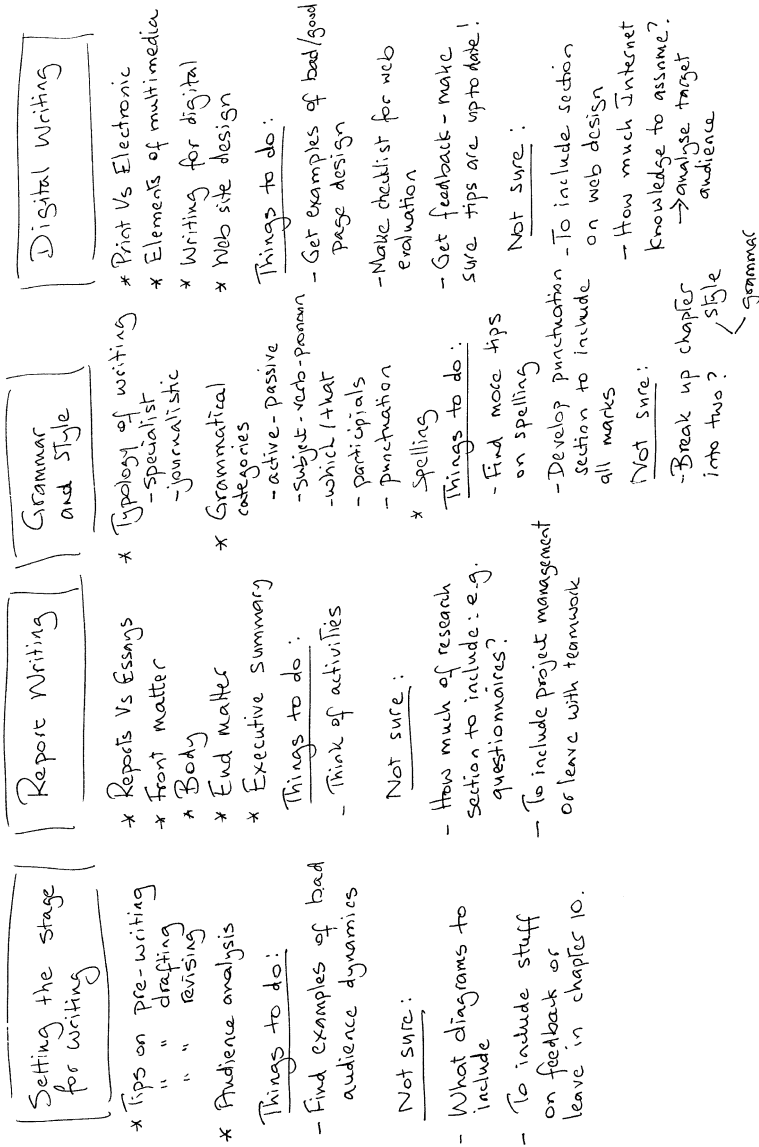


Figure 2 Storyboard outline

writing process you are still thinking and organising information. Make yourself receptive to influences that can provide inspiration: keep your topic in the back of your mind as you read the papers, watch television, and listen to conversations or lectures. Read, watch, listen critically, and seize all that is productive for your purposes. Also, be open to serendipity – inspiration through sudden, previously unrecognised connections. Many great scientific and technical discoveries were made accidentally, by sudden awareness of previously unseen analogies.

If you get stuck when drafting, don't attempt to complete the draft in one go. Instead, let it incubate by putting it on the 'back burner' of your mind and coming back to it later. The time lapse between giving up on a draft and coming back to it could be a few minutes, hours, overnight, or more – depending on project deadlines, of course! In the meantime, you can do something that, even though it may seem irrelevant, allows your thoughts to gestate.

For longer or important documents, discuss your progress with others. You may find that they offer you valuable insights that you would have missed if you tried to work completely alone.

► **Revising and editing**

Revising is arguably the most important stage of the writing process. Many inexperienced writers jump straight from writing to proofreading without going through the revising process, often with unfortunate results. In fact, as much as 85 per cent of a professional writer's time is spent revising.

In longer projects, it is important to take a break between writing and revising. By this stage of the writing process, you are likely to be tired of the project. A good writer can truly revise writing by seeing the text again anew (which is, in fact, the literal meaning of 'revise'). Proper revision doesn't simply mean correcting errors in spelling and grammar. Rather, you must decide, honestly, whether the writing is really effective in relation to its audience and purpose. If it is not, it takes creativity and vision to figure out what needs to be changed and how. Revising can also be brutal; sometimes the best way forward is to delete material that may have taken hours or days to draft.

An important part of revision is making sure you have a sustained focus and purpose throughout the document. Focusing encourages you to establish what the main point of your document will be. Every document, from the shortest memo to the most intricate report, must contain one overriding point

– the main message of the text. Make sure this point stands out, by stating it in a complete sentence at several different stages of the writing process.

Ask yourself: **What is the focal point?**

And: **What is its significance in the given context?**

Revising involves a series of steps, each asking the writer to consider a series of questions moving from general to specific concerns. When revising, start by considering the broad levels of the written document – the big picture: focus (main message), purpose and organisation (logical development of paragraphs and sections). If all is well in the general organisation of the document, move on to examine cohesion (signposting to guide the reader), style, and grammar. Finish off with formatting (page design, layout and fonts), documentation (referencing of sources) and spelling. The rest of the book gives guidelines on all these elements.

Ultimately, ensure that your delivery copy shows the characteristics of high quality professional writing:

- a clear focus and significance;
- information that is up-to-date, relevant, sufficient and accurate;
- coherent organisation;
- compelling and appealing style;
- professional layout and presentation.

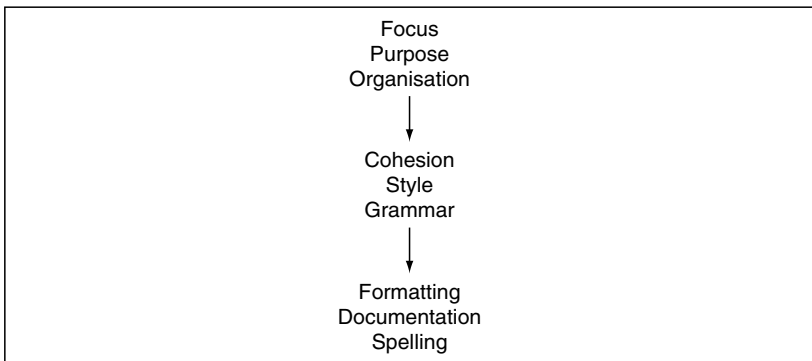


Figure 3 The revising process

► Tips for successful writers

As a conclusion to this chapter, here are some guidelines for effective writing on which most successful writers agree. Whether you want to write creative texts, professional documents, scientific reports or promotional articles, these are some rules that writers worldwide have found valid and practical.

1. *No need to wait for inspiration.* Writing creates itself rather like eating arouses the appetite. Most professional writers write on a schedule to meet publishing deadlines, whether they initially feel like it or not. So start writing before you have thought out completely what you want to say. It doesn't matter if you start by writing nonsense, repetitions, fragments or mind maps. You will discover what you want to write by writing and not just by thinking. Your document will eventually write itself.
2. *Revise as you write.* Most professional writers do at least two, and sometimes many more, drafts of anything they write. To be a successful writer, you should see yourself both as innovator (coming up with new ideas and new connections between ideas) and editor (re-arranging and cutting out parts of your text).
3. *Become observant.* All kinds of writing emerge from experience so the more experience you get in your chosen field the better a writer you will become. Also, being a good writer by definition means being good at dealing with people. Writing always has readers and the more you understand people's behaviour and reactions the better a writer you will be.
4. *Record different types of material that you may one day use in your writing.* Professional writers keep a record of ideas, objects or events that catch their eye, even if these may not seem relevant to what they are writing at the moment. Writers carry a notebook and pen everywhere and many carry a small tape recorder to record their thoughts and observations immediately as they come.
5. *Use physical details of writing consistently.* Most writers have their preferred tools and stick to them. This could mean using the same desk, which is located in a special place in your study, using a specific type of pen or word processor, or keeping your writing in special files and folders.
6. *Get feedback.* In contrast to what some people wrongly believe, writing is not a solitary activity. A written text is meant to be read, so discuss your projects with friends and colleagues, and distribute your drafts for comments. Other people may be able to give you valuable insights on your work that you would have missed if you worked in isolation.

7. *Learn the conventions and standards of your language.* Successful writers know standard English very well. Although writing is based to a large extent on skill, imagination and knowledge, it is still a technical medium dependent on grammatical rules. Even if you want to break those rules, like many writers in fact do, you need to know what they are so as to manipulate them.

► **Keywords**

- audience analysis
- audience dynamics
- brainstorming
- mind mapping
- revising
- writer–reader complicity

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