INFOLINE
TIPS, TOOLS, AND INTELLIGENCE FOR TRAINERS

Issue 1007
July 2010

Writing for Readability

Ken Kirk

BUSINESS SKILLS

PUBLISHED BY THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT | INFOLINE.ASTD.ORG

ASTD PRESS

JULY 2010 | Vol. 27 | ISSUE 1007

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WRITING FOR READABILITY

Printed in the United States of America.

For help or inquiries about your subscription, please contact Customer Care at 1.800.628.2783/1.703.683.8100 (international).

Infoline (ISSN 87559269, ISBN 9781562867270, Electronic ISBN 9781607286271) is published monthly by the American Society for Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. *Infoline* is available for subscription in print or digitally. The subscription rate for 12 issues is $99 (for ASTD national members) and $139 (for nonmembers). Periodicals postage paid at Alexandria, Virginia, and additional entries. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Infoline,* P.O. Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-1443. Claims for replacement of subscription issues not received must be made within three months of the issue date.

Virtually every workplace reader gripes about lengthy and long-winded business documents—and rightly so. In an economy that is "more information based than industrial," companies lose money when the chief commodity is trafficked inefficiently.

In the United States, email alone consumes an average of 13 hours per week per worker. Assuming that the average person earns $50,000 a year, the time spent reading and answering internal and external messages costs a company $16,250 per worker each year.

To offset the high cost of composing and comprehending, many managers advise staff to be brief and avoid wordy emails, memos, and business letters. However, workplace writers are rarely offered specific strategies for achieving brevity, particularly at the sentence level.

In fact, most corporate writing workshops focus exclusively on grammar and usage. Attendees learn the old (misleading) chestnut about never ending a statement with a preposition, but rarely are they taught how to write an effective sentence—that is, prose that is written to be read. As a result, you continue to write perfectly grammatical, sprawling sentences with redundant phrasing and inflated word choices. In other words, the problem remains unsolved, and the price of low readability soars.

In academia, the audience is often singular and your task is to show the instructor that you have mastered the material and have a broad vocabulary. You are not giving your audience new information, and your goal ultimately boils down to arguing for your intelligence, critical thinking skills, and ability to memorize. You are the main attraction.

You learn to write in school and rely on those skills when you enter the workplace. As a result, you may overuse doublespeak and fail to communicate anything to your respective audiences.

You tend to develop some very counterproductive writing habits and grow comfortable with using language that communicates nothing—or leaves all the heavy lifting to the reader. Writer-centered prose is a problem in both academia and the workplace, but academic writing particularly uses long-winded diction. You are praised when you can take a simple claim or line of reasoning and convert it to something longer and more complicated than it really is.

This *Infoline* will attempt to tackle the readability issue more appropriately by discussing guidelines for writing clear and concise sentences in your workplace writing. The goal is to practice composing a sentence that requires only one reading to decipher the intended message. All of these rules can be applied to any writing situation.

Please note that this *Infoline* will not include lessons on grammar, mechanics, or standard usage—most writers are already competent in these areas from their academic experience and workshops. Rather, you will learn strategies to

- tighten and simplify your sentences
- eliminate wordiness and redundant phrasing
- build a vocabulary to help your co-workers revise their work.

IDENTIFY YOUR READER

Knowing the education, experience, and position of your reader is critical, because your audience will shape how you present your content. In terms of your approach, there is a great deal of difference between presenting the results of a report and convincing a proposal evaluator to accept your solution to a problem.

Each person who reads your document brings a different set of needs and expectations to the table. Although every communication situation has three fundamental components (a writer, a reader, and a message), the audience is often treated as an afterthought, as the writer is preoccupied with the subject matter rather than *how* it is presented.

Your reader may be a supervisor, technician, layperson, or any number of individuals with varying knowledge and interest in your subject. Although your audience will change depending on the writing situation, you can make some general assumptions about all workplace readers:

- **Your reader reads words, not minds.** Never assume that your audience understands your meaning implicitly. You must strive to outline your message with precise wording to avoid a breakdown in communication.
- **Your reader "boils things down."** Your audience will read each sentence and seek out the key idea.
- **Your reader will misunderstand you, given the chance.** This statement is particularly true if you are writing to a manager—a reader who tends to view each situation with optimism.
- **Your reader does not have to read what you write.** In school, you have the luxury of writing for the instructor who hands out grades. Therefore, you hold it as an item of faith that your reader will carefully read every document you compose. However, in the workplace, you must assume that your reader will stop reading if frustrated by a lack of clarity and concision. As a writer, it is your job to make your prose feel effortless to read.
- **Your reader is impatient.** This simply means that your reader is a busy person who always has something to do other than read your correspondence. Your reader expects your sentences to be efficient, requiring one read for comprehension.

To make sure that the reader is at the heart of what you write, see the sidebar *Make Your Writing Reader-Centric*.

HOW TO WRITE BETTER SENTENCES

The following guidelines will assist you in tightening and simplifying your sentences.

CONTROL THE LENGTH OF YOUR SENTENCES

If your readers are familiar with your subject and your purpose, you may use longer (20–30 words), more complicated sentences. However, *you do not have to*.

In most workplace situations, rely on shorter sentences, which are easier to comprehend. However, also vary the length of your sentences to make your writing more lively and readable, and—as a rule—avoid strings of long sentences. Because your readers are busy people, your sentences should be tailored for comprehension on the *first* read.

USE COMMON SENTENCE STRUCTURES

Rely on those common sentence structures you use when you speak—subject-verb, subject-verb-object, and subject-verb-complement—to make your sentences more straightforward, more natural, and easier to understand. If time permits, read your document aloud to check your phrasing for awkwardness.

An awkward sentence is any statement that defies a reader's standard expectations. Do not feel silly quietly reading your work aloud—even if you are surrounded by occupied cubicles. This important aspect of revision will help you catch grammatically correct, but poorly constructed sentences, like the following gems:

To quickly configure the software is my job.

She is the supervisor that you met last week that John recommended.

There has been an increase in the amount of leave being used this year.

Using the common sentence structures, these sentences can be written more clearly as the following:

My job is to quickly configure the software.

Last week, you met the supervisor whom John recommended.

The amount of leave used this year has increased.

MAKE YOUR WRITING READER-CENTRIC

Readers comprehend the flow of information in a document sentence by sentence using their short-term memories. Moving left to right from one idea to the next, they actively store information from the previous sentence and apply it to the next statement, then to the next, and so on.

Good writing makes this process seem effortless, because the short-term memory is not strained. However, when the writer does not properly control the flow of information, too many ideas must be kept in mind at one time. The reader will quickly become frustrated and must reread previous passages from the text to fully comprehend it.

Short-term memories have a finite capacity for the number of elements the reader can hold in mind at one time (between four and nine items). Therefore, you must consider both your reader's interest and short-term memory as precious resources.

To ease your reader through your text, employ these strategies offered by Carolyn Matalene of the University of South Carolina:

A+B, B+C, C+D, D+E

Readers have an easier time comprehending a document when each sentence moves from familiar information to new information. The subject of your sentence should contain information they have heard before, while the new content is introduced in the verb (action) of your statement.

The next sentence will begin with a subject introduced within the action of the previous sentence (Matalene, 1993, pp. 62). If excessive new information is provided in each sentence, the reader will be lost. The chain of sentences in a paragraph can be expressed in the following formula:

A+B, B+C, C+D, D+E

Using this formula, each subsequent sentence introduces new information from the previous sentence. The following example shows this formula at work:

You should review your company's style manual regarding whether to use particular kinds of ***phrasing. Some expressions*** *are fine in informal writing situations but are considered unprofessional* ***in the workplace. In your job,*** *you should avoid slang and sarcasm when you write.* ***Craft sentences*** *that reflect a tone of politeness and respect for* ***your clients and co-workers.*** *Otherwise,* ***they*** *may question your communication skills or your familiarity with basic company policy.*

A+B, A+C, A+D, A+E

Because you may be explaining complex new information in your document, you may need to control information even more carefully. If your audience is unfamiliar with your content, use the same subject in successive sentences to give your reader's short-term memory a breather, as in this formula:

A+B, A+C, A+D, A+E

Accommodating your audience's short-term memory increases your document's readability. Consider how this letter excerpt explains complicated information to a credit union member so only one read is required for full comprehension:

Due to the unique function purpose of ***corporate credit unions, such institutions*** *are permitted to invest in many types of securities forbidden to credit unions like Standard State. In addition,* ***their*** *unique role in the industry often requires corporate credit unions to pursue more aggressive investment strategies than credit unions like Standard State. During the last several years, many* ***corporate credit unions*** *have invested in mortgage-related* ***securities*** *to generate income. However, the real estate recession has adversely affected the performance of some these* ***securities,*** *which in turn, has eroded* ***their*** *market value. When* ***securities*** *lose value, companies holding* ***them*** *as investments must reflect this loss in value on their quarterly financial statements.*

Because the audience likely has a low level of knowledge regarding the banking industry, the writer controls the flow of information by steadily conveying new material in the context of familiar material.

KEEP SUBJECTS AND VERBS TOGETHER

For stylistic effect, some writers will separate their subjects and verbs with clauses that modify the performer of the action. However, in workplace writing, bear in mind that your reader is trained to expect the verb to follow the subject.

To make your sentence simpler and clearer, keep the subject and verb together, so your reader does not lose track of the doer and the action. Consider the following sentence:

The staff writer, having completed the proposal draft, decided to leave early for lunch.

The subject, *the staff writer*, and verb, *decided*, are separated unnecessarily by the clause modifying the subject. In most cases, this is an easy fix. Simply move the clause to the front of the sentence so that nothing comes between the subject and verb:

Having completed the proposal draft, the staff writer decided to leave early for lunch.

EXPRESS YOUR KEY IDEA AS A VERB

The verb is the most emphatic part of any sentence because it expresses an action. Your reader will more easily comprehend your sentence's main idea if it is put in verb form. Therefore, you should express your key idea as a verb and choose an action verb rather than the weaker "to be" or "to have" verbs.

When writers make the key idea of a sentence a noun, the key idea is *nominalized*—that is, the element that should be the verb is unnecessarily converted to a noun. Writers then must use a weaker verb to form a complete sentence. Nominalization therefore creates wordy sentences with low readability. Consider the following examples:

*The keynote speaker gave **answers** to the audience's questions.*

*The partners reached **agreement** to proceed.*

The main idea in these sentences is each expressed as a noun. Notice that the weaker verbs—*gave* and *reached*—would be implicit if the stronger verbs *answered* and *agreed* were substituted, as in the following example:

*The keynote speaker **answered** the audience's questions.*

*The partners **agreed** to proceed.*

CONTROL YOUR USE OF SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

For your purposes, a subordinate clause is the subject and verb within a sentence (main clause) that *cannot* stand on its own. If you attempted to separate the clause as its own sentence, the phrase would be a sentence fragment, such as in the following cases:

*The staff assistant that **I am training** is very competent.*

*Unfortunately, the prototype had **some kinks that were obvious.***

*My secretary will be **the one who provides you with detailed notes and a copy of the itinerary.***

Unnecessary subordinate clauses affect your sentence's clarity and concision. If you read the above sentences aloud, you will notice their excessive wordiness immediately. To tighten and simplify your sentences, limit your use of subordinate clauses. In revising your sentences, you can eliminate unnecessary subordinate clauses in the following ways:

- If it adds nothing to the sentence, remove the clause altogether.
- Replace the clause with a word.
- Cut the verb so the clause becomes a noun phrase within the main clause.

Here are the previous sentences revised using the guidelines above:

***I am training** a very competent staff assistant.*

*Unfortunately, the prototype had some **obvious** kinks.*

*My secretary will **provide** you with detailed notes and a copy of the itinerary.*

Also note that your reader is conditioned to expect important information to appear in the main clause of a sentence. However, many writers put important information in a subordinate clause rather than the main clause. Tucking away key ideas and information in subordinate clauses deemphasizes their importance. Therefore, you should tailor your prose to your reader's expectations.

CHOOSE THE APPROPRIATE VOICE

Most of you learned in school that using the passive voice—making the object of the sentence the subject—should be avoided in all writing situations. Some instructors even suggest that passive voice is grammatically incorrect and will make you the object of ridicule to more sophisticated readers. Neither of these claims is true. While overuse of passive voice can make our writing stilted and dull, it may help you achieve clarity in some cases. Consider the following sentence:

The staff assistant *delivered the files to headquarters.*

If a manager asked you *who* delivered the files to headquarters, then the active voice—as indicated above—is more appropriate, because you were asked about the doer of the action, in which case your sentence should begin with a subject that immediately answers the question.

However, if that manager asked *what* the staff assistant delivered to headquarters, then the answer to the question would be tucked away at the end of sentence. Therefore, you should use the passive voice in this instance so that the object—the *what*—is emphasized, as in the following sentence:

The folders *were delivered to headquarters by the staff assistant.*

Passive voice also can help you plug a subject into a sentence when you are not quite sure who or what performed the action. In some cases, the doer of the action is implied, and your reader does not need it spelled out. Consider the following:

Employees who are late may be subject to disciplinary action.

The proposal was thought to be well-written.

In the second sentence, omitting the doers of the action—the ones who think the proposal is well-written—implies to the reader that there is a consensus regarding the quality of the document. Therefore, you do not need to emphasize that which is generally considered true. The reader will infer it.

In longer sentences, the passive voice can help your reader smoothly transition from one sentence to the next. Remember that your reader's short-term memory is a precious commodity, and you should tailor your prose to take advantage of that limited space.

SIMPLIFY YOUR SUBJECT

Your subject is the doer of an action in a sentence. Therefore, your subject will always be a noun—a person, place, thing, or idea. In some cases, your subject may be a noun articulating a complicated condition or notion with many noun and verb phrases. In fact, according to grammar rules, you could theoretically have an endless subject in a sentence, like the following:

The mailroom clerk from Delaware who used to work in the security branch but was reassigned to his new position when the department was downsized claims our package did not arrive yesterday.

What is the subject of the above sentence? A better question is whether your reader will be able to identify it. Your audience might reasonably assume that *the mailroom clerk* is the subject, but that is only part of it.

COMMON REDUNDANT PHRASES

Replace common redundant phrases with these words:

REDUNDANT	INSTEAD, USE…
close proximity	close
free gift	gift
end result	result
reason why	reason
basic fundamentals	basics
first and foremost	first
completely finish	finish
one and the same	the same
collective group	group
honest truth	truth
first priority	priority
whether or not	whether
aims and goals	goals
growth and expansion	growth
time period	time
repeat again	repeat
month of January	January
potential hazard	hazard
new development	development
warn in advance	warn

The string of prepositional phrases and verb phrases are also part of the subject. They modify the subject and tell you something about the clerk. In other words, everything that comes before the verb is the subject. A long subject creates a "top-heavy" sentence in which information is loaded at the beginning of the sentence, and the key idea—the verb—is pushed to the end and gets virtually no emphasis.

Complicated subjects will derail your reader. If he or she cannot determine the subject right away, then revise the sentence for clarity. Please note that the example above is a slight exaggeration of the kinds of top heavy sentences seen in business writing—but not by much. Consider this sentence:

Using a flex schedule in the engineering department during the holiday season *may improve employee morale.*

The subject is everything that comes before the verb. The noun phrase, *using a flex schedule,* is attached to two successive prepositional phrases, collectively expressing an idea. Your busy reader will likely need to pause and reread the sentence to process it. Writers who regularly use top heavy sentences will frustrate their readers, especially when long subjects are used in successive sentences.

To simplify the subject, detach the prepositional phrase *during the holiday season* and move it to the beginning of the sentence as an introductory clause. Moving the phrase to the beginning of the sentence works well, because it tells you something about the subject *without* being part of it, thus creating a more manageable read.

The other prepositional phrase, *in the engineering department*, actually modifies the direct object of the sentence, the noun that receives or is affected by the action—*employee morale*. To further simplify your subject, you can attach the prepositional phrase to the direct object. With some simple rearranging, you now have one noun phrase as your subject:

During the holiday season, ***using a flex schedule*** *may improve employee morale in the engineering department.*

USE COMMANDS WHEN GIVING SUGGESTIONS OR INSTRUCTIONS

Please be advised that the analyzer must be calibrated every 72 hours.

The sentence is suggesting that the reader perform an action. However, the suggestion is indirect because the action is nominalized. In this case, the reader is asked to *calibrate*. Therefore, the action should be expressed as a verb to emphasize the command and eliminate wordiness:

*Please **calibrate** the analyzer every 72 hours.*

CUT REDUNDANT MODIFIERS

English is loaded with expressions that unnecessarily repeat an idea already reflected in the sentence. Although we may use them in casual conversation, such phrases should be avoided in writing. As you continue to reduce your sentence to its bare essentials, ask yourself if a word is adding something or simply restating something that has already been established or implied.

For instance, consider the phrase *personal beliefs*. If someone has a belief, then the word itself implies that it is *personal*, so the adjective is unnecessary. Although there are many examples, see the sidebar *Common Redundant Phrases* for a few.

CUT MEANINGLESS MODIFIERS

To compress your sentence into the fewest words possible, eliminate words and phrases that serve only as unnecessary padding. While you use them all of the time when you speak, these adverbs and stock phrases draw attention away from your content on paper. Two of the most common unnecessary phrases are "in order" and "as a whole." See the sidebar *Meaningless Modifiers* for more examples.

MEANINGLESS MODIFIERS

Avoid these meaningless modifiers:

generally	uniformly
kind of	given
relatively	clearly
all things considered	in reality
basically	actually
really	virtually
at the end of the day	in this case
for all intents and purposes	various
quite	plainly
definitely	very
practically	certain
essentially	rather

AVOID METADISCOURSE

Metadiscourse is defined as "talking about talking"—that is, the writer discusses his or her relationship to the subject with qualifying phrases like "My belief is" or "Having researched this topic for several weeks, I came to the conclusion that...." When you stuff your sentences with these phrases, the content becomes writer-centered and the bottom line is deemphasized. Consider this sentence:

In my opinion, although I have not yet received feedback from every department, it seems that the correct course of action is for us to proceed.

The main idea is buried in this dense sentence. By cutting the metadiscourse, the idea gets more emphasis and the writer sounds more confident. Here is the suggested revision:

We should proceed.

SAY WHAT YOU MEAN

Doublespeak is language designed to give an air of importance to the insignificant. In some cases, it serves to distance a doer from his or her action to defer accountability. You see examples of double-speak in every context of communication: business, academia, politics, and everyday conversation.

Most of the time, you can spot doublespeak when we see or hear it. But if you have doubts, ask yourself these questions: *Who is saying what to whom, under what conditions and circumstances, with what intent, and with what results?*

Doublespeak should be avoided because it is language that pretends to communicate, but really does not. It is designed to bury reality in calculated and often excessive word choices. Here are few common kinds of doublespeak to watch out for in your workplace writing, as outlined by William Lutz in "The World of Doublespeak":

Euphemism

A euphemism is an inoffensive or positive phrase used to avoid a harsh, unpleasant, or distasteful reality. When you excuse yourself to "go to the restroom" or mention that someone is "sleeping with" someone else, you do not mislead anyone about your meaning, because you recognize the cultural taboos of discussing bodily functions and sex in direct terms.

However, euphemism also can work to deceive or confuse, particularly in business contexts. A manager or company executive may deliver bad news in indirect terms to maintain an image of a caring individual and make the information seem less troublesome, as in the following cases:

"The company is making budget cuts, and I'm sorry, but your position has been derecruited."

"His connection with this institution was terminated."

"We have an impressive selection of pre-owned vehicles available at our Labor Day sale extravaganza."

Avoid euphemisms unless you suspect your reader is sensitive and will not take your message well. If you are relaying information upward to a supervisor or manager, it is especially important to use direct terms.

Studies have shown that managers tend to interpret facts more optimistically, and euphemisms encourage this positive slant—even when it is inappropriate. In 1985, Roger Boisjoly, an engineer working on the Space Shuttle Challenger, wrote to his supervisor that there was a "jump ball"—that is, a 50/50 chance—as to whether the launch would end in disaster. The basketball euphemism downplayed the urgency and invited management to take the threat less seriously. On January 28, 1986, the shuttle exploded 73 seconds after launching.

Jargon

Jargon is the specialized language of a trade, profession, or similar group used to give profundity and authority to speakers and their subject matters. Like euphemism, jargon has its place, but when used improperly, it serves not to express but to impress.

If your reader works in your department and understands industry terms, then using jargon is acceptable because your audience speaks the language. However, use familiar terms if your reader works outside your department or has a low level of knowledge regarding your subject. Do not assume that your audience will understand your jargon simply because *you* do.

If you decide to use jargon, make sure that you define the term you are using. Otherwise, your reader will think you are putting on airs—deliberately making the simple appear complex and the ordinary and obvious seem insightful. For example, glass becomes "fused silicate." A crack in a metal beam becomes a "discontinuity." A counterfeit dollar bill is a "non-negotiable instrument." In teaching, a sentence like the following is cringe-worthy:

Have the class work at pupil stations and wait for the classroom manager to apply the next action plan. Remind them that on Friday, we will engage in a criterion-referenced assessment on their knowledge base.

Gobbledygook

Gobbledygook is piling on words to overwhelm an audience—the bigger the words and longer the sentences, the better. Long, dense, and complex words and sentences may work, but not simply because they are long. As doublespeak, gobbledygook may either substitute for a speaker's lack of knowledge or insight about a subject, or it may once again serve to confuse.

Known for his trademark doublespeak, Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, once said, "History cautions that extended periods of low concern about credit risk have invariably been followed by reversal, with an attendant fall in the prices of risky assets. Such developments apparently reflect not only market dynamics but also the all-too-evident alternating and infectious bouts of human euphoria and distress and the instability they engender." In 1988, he clarified the statement in his memoirs: "I guess I should warn you, if I turn out to be particularly clear, you've probably misunderstood what I've said."

In 1972, Ford Motor Company sent a letter to those who purchased the defective 1972 Mercury Montego: "With respect to possible mechanical deficiencies, the rear axle bearings of the cars can deteriorate. Continued driving with a failed bearing could result in disengagement of the axle shaft and adversely affect vehicle control."

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR WORD CHOICES

Students often choose 25-cent words to dazzle their teachers, because an underlying goal of all written academic work is to prove your sophistication. However, nothing turns workplace readers off more than writing to impress.

When your sentences are long and your words multi-syllabic, your tone often comes across as pompous and writer-centered. Remember: Your task is not to leave a lasting scholarly impression.

When a word is used to impress, the writer assumes the reader either knows its meaning or will bother to look it up. Your objective is for your reader to *comprehend* your thoughts, not run to the nearest dictionary. As a rule, use shorter, plainer words so your audience achieves understanding on the first reading. Trade the following "big" words for more straightforward ones:

- *aggregate* for *total*
- *ascertain* for *find out*
- *domicile* for *house, apartment*
- *facilitate* for *ease, help*
- *inquiry* for *question*
- *optimum* for *best*
- *subsequent* for *next*
- *sufficient* for *enough*
- *terminology* for *terms*
- *utilize* for *use.*

CHANGE NEGATIVES TO AFFIRMATIVES

By default, the human brain processes statements, particularly commands, in the affirmative. When the purpose of your sentence is to advise your reader to do something, avoid negatives. In other words, it is usually more direct to tell your reader to do something rather than *not* do something. Consider the following examples:

*Do **not discontinue** medication unless symptoms of dizziness, nausea, and drowsiness alleviate within six hours.*

*Do **not go** outside until instructed otherwise.*

What are these sentences asking? Initially, it is unclear because they need to be turned inside out to be processed. To tax your reader less, form your statements in the affirmative, like the following:

Continue *medication unless symptoms of dizziness, nausea, and drowsiness alleviate within six hours.*

Stay inside *until instructed otherwise.*

Also, convert the following negative phrases into affirmatives for clarity:

- *not different* to *similar*
- *not remember* to *forget*
- *not many* to *few*
- *not believe* to *doubt, disbelieve*
- *not included* to *omitted*
- *not often* to *rarely*
- *not have* to *lack*
- *not complete* to *incomplete.*

Some writers like to craft affirmative statements in an understated manner by using phrases called *litotes*. In most cases, litotes is a positive statement articulated as a negative, as in the following sentences:

This is no small task.

Your proposal is not bad.

I'm not unprepared for our presentation.

Your proposal is not without its merits.

Litotes is only appropriate in business writing if you are conveying bad news and want to soften its impact. Otherwise, convey your statements with positive language, as in the following examples:

This is a ***big*** *task*

Your proposal is ***good.***

I'm ***prepared*** *for the presentation.*

Your proposal ***has*** *merits.*

FIND A WORKPLACE WRITING PROCESS

Meeting tight deadlines is an equally important aspect in workplace writing efficiency. You must find an effective workplace writing process for cranking out effective memos, reports, and emails. For some writers, the tighter the deadline, the more they experience writer's block, which ultimately eats up their time for revision later.

Everyone's process will be unique, but the following suggestions will assist you in overcoming some of the anxiety associated with writing under pressure.

KNOW YOUR SUBJECT

Some writers have difficulty drafting because they have not taken the time to consider why they are writing in the first place. Before you begin drafting, you should know the answers to these key questions:

- What is my subject?
- What is my purpose?
- Who is my reader?
- What is the situation?

If you are unsure how to answer these questions, you are *not* ready to write and will waste time by doing so; you will likely produce a draft that is rejected by your manager because it takes the wrong approach or fails to address the topic appropriately.

Each question is important, but your sense of audience is critical. You must know you reader's level of interest and knowledge regarding your subject. If you fail to consider that your reader has no interest in your subject, you will omit an opening paragraph persuading them why they should. As a result, your audience will stop reading your document, unconvinced that it is relevant to them.

In addition, if you do not understand how much your reader knows about your topic, you will probably end up telling them what they already know, which wastes their time.

For ideas on how to analyze and approach different types of readers, see the sidebar *Audience Analysis: The Personalities of Workplace Readers*.

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS: THE PERSONALITIES OF WORKPLACE READERS

The following table outlines the most common brands of readers you will write for and to professionally. As a rule, ensure that you accurately identify the most effective approach to addressing your audience.

	THINKER	DOER	FEELER	INTUITOR
Characteristics	Analytical Conservative Skeptical	Confident Tough Competitive	Agreeable Entertaining Dependable	Reserved Conceptual Impatient
Strengths	Perfectionist Well-organized Objective	Pragmatic Time-focused Receptive to options	Probing Supportive Sensitive	Original Flexible Idealistic
Weaknesses	Indecisive Inflexible Judgmental	Inattentive Impulsive Emotionally cold	Subjective Procrastinates Overly cautious	Impractical Unrealistic Does not use time well
How to approach your text and gain the tone you want:	Begin your document with the point of least disagreement. Triple-check your work carefully, as a misplaced comma will lose this reader's confidence in your document's value.	Be polite in your document, but do not overdo it. Sometimes a friendly tone can convey weakness to a Doer. Get to the point and keep it short. Use tables and lists over complete sentences when possible, because experts suggest that Doers respond better to this tactic.	Open your document with a polite introduction, thanking the reader for his or her attention. Use an informal, conversational tone to avoid coming across as cold and distant. Frame your discussion around the reader's self-interest. What is in it for them?	To accommodate the Intuitor, do not provide many details. Give a broad overview of your points rather than minutia. Include a timetable for completing the proposed actions, and promise to initiate contact if your reader does not respond within a specified timeframe.

Used with permission of Rockhurst University's Continuing Education Center.

TAKE THE TIME TO REVISE

A key element of your workplace writing process will be how well you understand the difference between revision and proofreading. Many writers only look for mechanical and spelling errors when they review their drafts. This is a huge mistake.

Revising should consume half of your writing process time. Yet, many writers have an aversion to this stage. They may gloss over the revision process because they are attached to their first drafts and do not like the idea of cutting out phrases and rearranging content.

However, few writers can produce a perfect first draft, and everyone must go through the painful—but utterly necessary—process. The revision process involves improving your organization and content. During that time, you or a colleague must objectively look at your paper through the eyes of a critic.

FOLLOW THE DIRECT WRITING PROCESS

Assuming that you know the answer to the four key questions outlined above, composition guru Peter Elbow offers a good solution for managing deadlines once you are ready to write.

If you are given an assignment, first determine how much time you have to complete it. Once you know your deadline, divide your time into two equal parts: free-writing and revision. For example, if you have only an hour to compose a memo, spend 30 minutes cranking out every "hunch, insight, and train of thought" that you think might belong in your document, says Elbow.

Your readers want the bottom line, so make sure that you address the key point of the document first. Aside from that, do not worry about the organization of your document; just say what you have to say. At halftime, stop writing and begin the revision process even if you are not finished free-writing. Revise your document according to the suggestions provided earlier in this article.

WHAT NEXT?

Because a few of the guidelines provided in this *Infoline* contradict some of our engrained writing habits from school, it may take some time to develop reader-centered sentences more efficiently.

Remember that practice makes proficient. You will not be a pro at writing immediately after reading this *Infoline*—it takes time and effort. But following these steps will make you a stronger writer, which will affect your business relationships and enhance your reputation.

The next step is to put what you have learned into action. Use the job aids at the end of this *Infoline* to help you apply the knowledge you have just gained. Once you can employ these tactics, you will be a better, more effective writer—one who writes for readability.

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Editor, *T&D*

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JOB AID

WRITING SKILLS CHECKLIST

Use this checklist when you begin editing your work. Print out a copy of your document and read it aloud. Place a checkmark to indicate places or passages on your document where the idea or concept seems clear or "right," and an X where the idea or concept seems to be misunderstood or "wrong," or where something needs to be added. Write directly on your draft and notate areas that prompted you to place a checkmark on the checklist. Once completed, revise your document to eliminate the problems you noted and review your final draft, checking off the sections below to ensure that all problems were addressed. Use the "other" rows at the bottom for any additional issues.

Content	✔
Is your purpose clear?	
Is your content coherent and clearly understood?	
Are you communicating appropriately with your audience?	
Is your content well-organized?	
Is your content well-developed?	
Sentence/Style	
Have you avoided subordinate clauses?	
Have you avoided redundant modifiers?	
Are you using the appropriate voice (active or passive)?	
Have you minimized the use of "to be"?	
Punctuation/Mechanics	
Have you minimized wordiness?	
Is your punctuation used appropriately?	
Are you using the right word choice (its/it's, affect/effect, that/which, etc.)?	
Do you have accurate subject/verb agreement?	
Other	

JOB AID

TEST YOUR WRITING SKILLS

Revise the sentences, changing only as much as you need to change to solve the problems in the sentence. Underline any subordinate clauses you see. Also, address redundancy.

1. I am invested in the idea that we can make improvements to our infrastructure.

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. After you submit the results that you collected on your field assignment, I will interpret the data that we need and offer you payment for your efforts.

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. If circumstances that are unforeseen arise, we should have a plan or idea of how to reassure our clients who are skeptical.

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. When and if we can find recruits who are capable engineers, I feel that our company will find solutions to our deficiency which is primary.

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. In the event that you misunderstand your supervisor's request, please make sure that you ask him or her for further clarification.

   _____

   _____

   _____

6. If and when we can free up some capital to build and establish franchises in the Midwest, past history shows we can double our profits for even more growth and expansion.

   _____

   _____

   _____

7. The company that I work for is initiating a new incentive program to increase our productivity while giving our workers who underachieve a chance to earn bonuses.

   _____

   _____

   _____

(continued on next page)

JOB AID

TEST YOUR WRITING SKILLS (continued)

Here are examples of how to best simplify the previous sentences:

1. ~~I am invested in the idea that~~ we can make **improvements** to our infrastructure.

Cut the metadiscourse and emphasize the key idea in the sentence—improving—by expressing it as a verb.

Revised sentence: *We can improve our infrastructure.*

2. After you submit ~~the results that you collected on your field assignment~~, I will interpret ~~the data that we need~~ and offer you **payment** for your effort.

This sentence contains two unnecessary subordinate clauses. Cut the first clause but keep *field assignment* because that noun phrase can be used to modify the *results*. The second subordinate clause contains one important idea—the necessary data. Cut the rest of the clause. Also express *payment* as an action.

Revised sentence: *After you submit your field assignment results, I will interpret the necessary data and pay you.*

3. If ~~circumstances that are unforeseen arise~~, we should have a **plan** or idea of how to reassure ~~our clients who are skeptical~~.

This example also has two unnecessary subordinate clauses. Cut them as you did in the previous sentence. Eliminate the redundancy of *plan* and i*dea*. Keep *plan* because it is a key idea and can be expressed as a verb. Also, you can put the introductory clause at the end so the action gets more emphasis.

Revised sentence: *We should plan how to reassure our skeptical clients if unforeseen circumstances arise.*

4. When and if we can find ~~recruits who are capable engineers~~, ~~I feel that~~ our company will find **solutions** to our deficiency, ~~which is primary~~.

Eliminate the subordinate clauses, cutting *I feel that* altogether because the reader can infer it is an opinion or belief. Eliminate the redundancy of *when* and *if*. Express *recruits* and *solutions* as verbs.

Revised sentence: *If we recruit capable engineers, our company will solve its primary deficiency.*

5. ~~In the event that~~ you misunderstand your supervisor's request, ~~please make sure that you him or her~~ for further clarification.

Replace the opening phrase with *if*. Remove the metadiscourse to emphasize the action. In addition, strive for gender neutrality over gender inclusion. Remove *him or her* because the phrase has no bearing on the sentence's meaning.

Revised sentence: *If you misunderstand your supervisor's request, ask for further clarification.*

6. If and ~~when~~ we can free up some capital to build and ~~establish~~ franchises in the Midwest, ~~past~~ history shows we can double our profits for ~~even~~ more ~~growth and~~ expansion.

Cut all of the redundancy in the sentence. Note that *even* is unnecessary because the doubling of profits modifies *profits* more specifically.

Revised sentence: *If we can free up some capital to build franchises in the Midwest, history shows we can double our profits for more expansion.*

7. ~~The company that I work for~~ is initiating a new incentive program to increase our productivity while giving our ~~workers who underachieve~~ a chance to earn bonuses.

The sentence is excessively word. To make the sentence more readable, cut the subordinate clauses and separate these ideas into two sentences. Replace *initiate* with a more straightforward term. Also, if the company is starting a program, its newness is implied.

Revised sentence: *My company is starting an incentive program to increase productivity; it will also give underachieving workers a chance to earn bonuses.*

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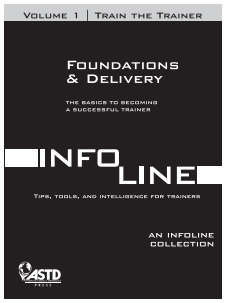

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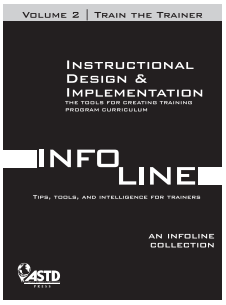

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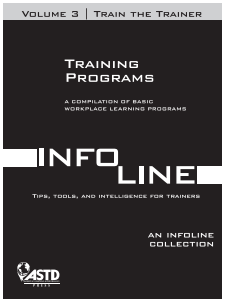

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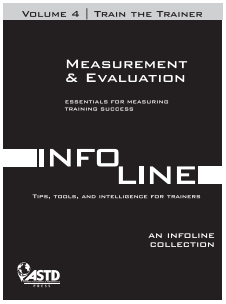

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1640 King Street Box 1443
Alexandria, VA 22313-1443 USA

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f: 703.683.8103 www.astd.org

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ISBN 978-1-56286-727-0

251007