

**TM470   The computing and IT project**

**Writing, Structuring, Styling and Editing Reports**

Copyright © 2022 The Open University

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the publisher.

# Contents

* [1 Introduction](#Session1)
* [2 Planning the report](#Session2)
  + [2.1 Introduction to writing the report](#Session2_Section1)
  + [2.2 Summary points](#Session2_Section2)
* [3 Structuring and styling your report](#Session3)
  + [3.1 Overall structure you are aiming for](#Session3_Section1)
  + [3.2 Structure of the main body](#Session3_Section2)
  + [3.3 Forming a structure](#Session3_Section3)
  + [3.4 Using diagrams](#Session3_Section4)
  + [3.5 Styles](#Session3_Section5)
  + [3.6 Conclusion](#Session3_Section6)
* [4 Checking, correcting and evaluating](#Session4)
* [5 Conclusion](#Session5)
* [Appendix: Some common writing traps](#Session6)
* [Reference](#Session7)

## 1 Introduction

The ability to write clear explanations of technical issues is the theme of this guide. It cannot be taken for granted. You don’t have to look far to find examples of hurried journalism where the author either doesn’t fully understand the subject or is unable to put it across clearly. Written instructions to carry out procedures safely, deal with emergencies or assemble a product are sometimes deeply flawed. Yet instructions must be accurate: one misleading word might be enough to create a disaster. Vague and inaccurate instructions often cause frustration and expensive mistakes.

The skill of writing good explanations of seemingly complex, technical issues is highly prized, widely sought and well worth developing for the following reasons.

* Managers of teams and team members need to have technical knowledge in common. Someone with the appropriate skill is required to produce the explanation.
* The readers of journals pay good money to obtain clear explanations of subjects with which they may, or may not, be familiar.
* Buyers of equipment seek clear explanations of how it should be used and perhaps some details of its working principles.
* Examiners reward students who answer their questions in a relevant and lucid manner and this is true for TM470.
* You need to compile and produce a well-written end-of-module assessment (EMA) report that gives justice to the work you have carried out in the project.

There is no single method for producing the best results. A few people have a natural ability to write well. Most of us have to work on our skills and improve steadily with experience. This guide is mainly concerned with the written word, though it is worth keeping in mind that graphic illustration can be a powerful way of explaining concepts and mechanisms. The aspects examined are summarised below.

**Planning the report**

* identifying the intended audience
* identifying the purpose
* selecting a medium
* deciding on the level of explanation

**Structuring and styling the report**

* a generic structure
* sections and their lengths
* structure of the main body
* forming a structure
* using diagrams

**Checking, correcting and evaluating the report**

* eliminating mistakes and misleading expressions
* critically evaluating to check that the writing is appropriate for the audience.

All this may appear too formal. In many cases where a short explanation is required in a familiar situation, the author will intuitively produce a clear, relevant explanation, without any formal planning. At the other extreme – when a detailed explanation is required, involving great complexity and an unfamiliar audience – it is advisable to carry out some formal planning beforehand. If the explanation is very long, then it will need structuring into a formal report, which is what you will be doing with your TM470 EMA.

Further guidance on project report writing can be found in the recommended textbook for this module:

* Weaver, P. (2003) Success in Your Project: A Guide to Student System Development Projects, Prentice Hall, ISBN 0-273-67809-4.

## 2 Planning the report

In writing any report, you must consider the following: audience, purpose and medium. These are vital aspects that are frequently forgotten.

* **Audience**.Who are you addressing? What level of understanding can you assume?
* **Purpose**.The reason for the communication. What do you want the recipients to get from it?
* **Medium**.The means you use for communication. This section focuses on the written word, though graphic illustration is another important medium.

At this stage it may be necessary to ask ourselves what kind of explanation is required. Is the purpose only to inform or is it to teach (perhaps introducing the need for self-testing to ensure the explanation has been understood)? Is there to be some aspect of entertaining, as in many popular magazines?

When you have a clear idea of your audience and the purpose for the communication then you can consider the technical level of the explanation. You must decide what knowledge to assume and what needs explaining. You must decide on a sequence that will make the explanation readily understandable, and choose the most appropriate medium to use in putting your ideas across.

## 2.1 Introduction to writing the report

**Structure**

The structure you decide on will reflect how you understand the concept. This is a personal matter, so the structures used will vary from author to author. Try to put yourself in the position of the reader, by starting from a position of common understanding, that is, from something familiar that the reader already knows. Then introduce new concepts in order to promote a higher level of understanding. You may be able to give a strongly linear type of argument, where each point made leads logically to another until a final conclusion is reached. More likely, you will have to make a number of points and then draw some conclusions from them all. If you have difficulty in explaining complex matters, consider the principle known as ‘separation of concerns’.

**Separation of concerns**

When we think about a situation our mind moves swiftly over a number of aspects, probably in no logical order. Brainstorming is taking place, often unconsciously. In considering a commercial situation, for example, questions of a financial nature may be mixed with ideas about practicalities, past experience, legality, company policy and so on. If we then write down our thoughts in the order they occur we are likely to convey some good points but confuse the reader in the process. This is the cause of a lot of muddled writing. A useful principle to follow is that of separation of concerns:

Start of Quote

Explanations may have many aspects to put across. Separate these out so that the reader can deal with them one by one. If you are writing about financial advantages, put them on their own in one paragraph or section. Deal with legal issues in a separate section, and so on: don’t mix them. If you need to link them in some way, then do so as a separate ‘concern’. You still have to decide on the sequence of sections, but this will not be too critical.

End of Quote

**Language, style and structure**

On the subject of language, style and structure in technical writing, here are some suggestions for your consideration.

* Whenever appropriate provide a title that expresses exactly what you are trying to explain. For example, ‘Mobile Phones’ gives the subject, but not the purpose; ‘Discussion of the Proposals for Mobile Phones’ is more explicit.
* Avoid writing long sections of continuous text. Divide them into subsections with an expressive title for each, to indicate the ‘concern’. This will help the reader keep track of the flow of the argument.
* An effective way to explain a difficult technical principle is to start with a practical example, then go to a more general, abstract discussion. This is a familiar technique: journalists often use it when writing for a non-specialist audience, for example. A more scholarly way, typical of the way of writing in a specialist journal, is to move from the general and abstract to the specific. In other words, describe a principle and then follow it with an example. As always, you need to consider your audience in deciding the best way to make your point.
* Consider the use of analogy, often a powerful way of clearing a mental blockage. It can help in the explanation of a complex idea by reference to more familiar ideas. Note, however, that an analogy is not a proof and that at some point it will break down.
* Whenever appropriate, support the text with graphical illustration. Use a photograph, drawing, diagram or cartoon to express a concept pictorially. As the old proverb suggests, ‘it will save a thousand words’.
* Vary your sentence length, but avoid writing very long sentences.
* Whenever possible, bring out human aspects in an explanation. However abstruse a technology is, it has somehow to be controlled and used by people.
* An alternative to traditional textual explanation is to list a number of relevant questions and then answer them. Skill is required to devise the questions a curious reader might ask; a good starting point is to talk to a curious reader.
* If the explanation is long, try to end it with a summary and perhaps a conclusion. Avoid leaving the reader unclear that the end of the explanation has been reached.

## 2.2 Summary points

At the beginning of the process of writing a report give some thought to the following minimal list of considerations.

* Who is your intended audience?
* What is the purpose of your report?
* What is the best medium for the purpose (text, graphics)?
* Identify the ‘concerns’.
* What sequence of ‘concerns’ can best provide the explanation?

## 3 Structuring and styling your report

## 3.1 Overall structure you are aiming for

Though different professions may have their own preferred report structure, any extended technical report has this generic structure.

### Generic structure

1. **Title and contents page**

These act as a quick reference page to show the structure of the report. If the reader can’t glance quickly at the contents page and see immediately the overall structure of the report, then you need to reword your headings and adjust your use of headings of different levels to make this possible.

1. **Brief introduction**

This presents the reader with the background of the report and outlines what is to come. It sets the scene, gets the reader ready to take in the main body of the report and alerts the reader to the sorts of outcomes that will emerge. This is the place where you must indicate the project aims. After reading the introduction the reader should know where she or he is being taken, why and what to expect. The introduction and the conclusion need to be designed as a pair.

1. **Background review**

In a more academic report, this is the literature review. But in an applied setting it might be equally important to alert the reader to similar applications or work to that which you are doing. In an applied project, this review serves a slightly different set of purposes from its role in pure research:

* + it demonstrates your grasp of the background, and hence establishes your knowledge of the subject
  + it helps to prevent you wasting time and effort re-inventing the wheel – if someone else has already done some of the legwork, why not use what they did?
  + it educates you and your reader about current, best expert opinion on the nature of the work and may indicate ways of carrying out the project.

1. **Main body**

This lays out the evidence (with methods and sources) and the analysis in a detailed and extended way. Very detailed sections that would make the flow of the argument harder to follow may be put in appendices (see below) and merely summarised in the body of the report.

You must support your argument with evidence at all times. Unsupported opinion is of little value and will gain few marks. When you agree or disagree with a statement you must give reasons. When you propose your own opinion you must provide the evidence and references that support your opinion. If you reference the opinion of others outside peer-reviewed journals, you need to make it clear why their opinion should be considered of value.

1. **A brief conclusion**

This section gives a recap of the main discussion and findings. It should step back and show how the report fits into the wider picture, indicating ways in which the work might be further developed in the future. It should also discuss the extent to which you succeeded in what you set out to do, the value of what you did and the scope for further work. The conclusion and introduction need to be designed as a pair. For instance if one is more detailed, the other can often be simpler. What the introduction sets up, the conclusion closes down like a pair of brackets surrounding the main body of the report.

1. **References and bibliography**

The reference list is for every source you quote. An optional bibliography would have significant sources you have used but have not mentioned in the report. Both lists allow your audience to obtain the original sources to find more information or to check your assertions.

1. **Appendices**

There may be one or more appendices containing specialised material that is too detailed or technical for the main body. Note that this should still be your own writing, not simply copied from elsewhere.

## 3.2 Structure of the main body

Given the total size of the report, and making a few basic good practice assumptions, it is a matter of simple arithmetic to work out roughly what the structure is going to look like.

Suppose you have allocated 5000 words (10 pages) to the main body of the report. Obviously it is not a good idea to just launch into a single 5000-word block of text, however well paragraphed it is. The reader needs to be helped along by milestones – clear, informative headings and sub-headings that signpost the structure of your argument. There are three basic good practice rules.

1. Few readers can comfortably cope with more than three levels of structure e.g. main divisions, sections, subsections. Once you get down to sub-subsections and sub-sub-subsections, readers begin to lose the thread of your argument.
2. Avoid very long sentences and use paragraphs appropriately. The text should be divided up in a reasonably even way. Don’t put 1000 words in one block of text, and only 50 words in the next.
3. For a compact argument of the kind you are presenting, you probably need a heading of some sort every 500 words or so – that is about a heading per page. This means that typically you will get a heading every seven paragraphs.

The arithmetic therefore suggests that dividing the 5000 or so words available for the main body into eight to ten chunks of text. That’s perhaps two or three major divisions, with each division appropriately split into sections.

If you try laying out what you want to say in something like this format you will soon get a sense of how much (or how little) there is room for. There is simply no point in devising a project that can’t be fitted into a framework of this scale.

## 3.3 Forming a structure

It is all very well to lay down arithmetic guidelines about what the end result should look like, but it is quite another matter to find yourself staring at a blank page trying to get your report to look like that. It is easy enough to recognise a well-made product when you see it ready-made, but quite another matter to make it yourself.

Unfortunately, though the end product you are aiming for is fairly standardised, the process by which you get there is a personal one. No two people do it in exactly the same way, and you need to find your own approach for yourself, largely by trial and error. However, there are some stepping stones that may help.

Get into the habit of collecting potential report ideas right from the first day of your project work. Even if the report writing is still nearly a year away, whenever you are completing your daily log make sure you note down any ideas, topics, and phrases that you think might come in handy for your report. Don’t tidy them up: just leave them as a collection of jottings – some broad, some localised – that convey the general scope and variety of what you would like to say.

By letting this need for material sit at the back of your mind and build up over a considerable period, you can include all those bright ideas that come to you in the middle of the night or are triggered by random incidents.

As you get nearer to starting work on your report, you should record any topics that occur to you more systematically. Always note down bibliographic details of anything you see in a book or journal that seems potentially relevant to your project.

Two methods for helping to develop structure are using ‘sticky notes’ and using spray diagrams.

### ‘Sticky notes’ method

Although this method uses pieces of paper, it can be adapted to work on your computer. It might be worth experimenting with both ways before deciding which you prefer.

1. **Transfer your collected ideas onto ‘sticky notes’**

A few weeks before you are ready to start on the report, go back through your log and put each of the report ideas you have noted over the year down on a sticky note – one note per idea. Likewise, go through any instructions you have been given about what is required for your report: look at the TM470 resources on report writing and prepare sticky notes for each potential report topic or idea suggested by these.

1. **Arrange the notes into clusters**

Find a large, flat, smooth area suitable for sticking your notes to, and on which you will be able to leave your notes for several weeks.

Group your notes in related clusters. What you are looking for are bits of material that will go together in potential sections or subsections of your report, or that define topics you need to develop. You may find that in some cases you begin to get clusters of clusters – prototype chapters, complete with sections within them. The clustering process itself will often identify gaps or trigger ideas for new topics that ought to be included.

Mull over the clusters in this cluster diagram for a few days; add to them or change them whenever something relevant occurs to you.

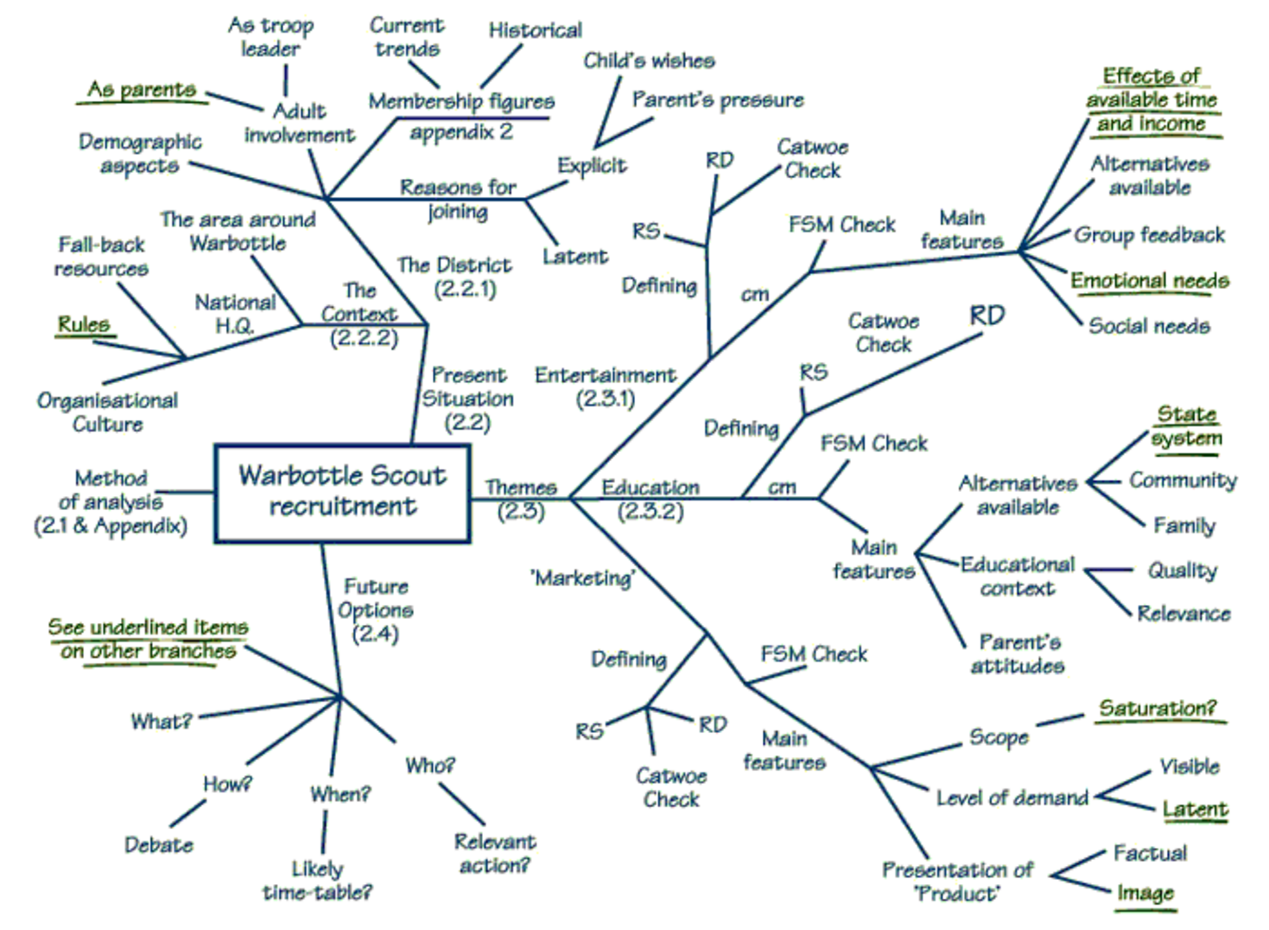
1. **Arrange the clusters into a coherent report structure**

When the clusters have stabilised a bit, start trying to rearrange your clusters into an actual report structure; aim for the kind of structure that you know is required to meet the constraints imposed by your word counts for each section. You are now ready to begin writing, essentially just filling in the structure you have designed.

### Spray diagram method

Spray diagrams can be logically equivalent to the cluster of sticky notes. Each branch is a cluster and each sub-branch is a sub-cluster. This hierarchical diagram can easily be treated as an outline or contents page for a report. An example is shown in Figure 3.1.

Start of Figure



**Figure 3.1**

[View description - Figure 3.1](" \l "Session3_Description1)

End of Figure

On a hand-drawn spray diagram you can’t easily rearrange the branches once they are written down – it is not as flexible as the clustering and re-clustering process using sticky notes. However, you may find it more readable, so once you have stabilised your cluster structure you might find it helpful to draw it as a spray diagram.

Spray diagrams really come into their own if you use one of the software packages that allow you to manipulate the spray diagram and store text behind each spray diagram node. At one level this can become just like the clustering process: you can rearrange the nodes and their associated text as you wish. At another level, you can use the software as an outliner: developing actual text for report sections behind each node, arranging these sections on screen, then saving the outline as a report format file that you can word-process. As always there is a learning curve to mastering such software, but if you enjoy such challenges you could try it.

### Choosing a sensible structure

Notice that though there are any number of different ways to carve up a topic, many of these will not slice it up in a way that will help your report. For instance, the names of the stages of your chosen project method are intended to divide the practical task of analysis into a series of procedural steps; they are not usually designed to provide good report headings. If you try to use them as major report headings, you may find that it doesn’t work. The report may feel constrained, clumsy and dull, with the logical and narrative flow hidden under layers of technical jargon.

Though the scheme in the outline below is related to the stages of one of the standard approaches, the slices have been regrouped and the headings have been adapted. This allows the report to develop as a readable story, unfolding towards a clear target rather than as a blow-by-blow description of the technical details of an algorithm.

Start of Box

Start of Computer Display

**An analysis of Warbottle District scout recruitment problems**

1.0 Introduction

2.0 The analysis

2.1 The approach adopted

2.2 The situation at present

2.2.1 Local situation

2.2.2 Context

2.3 The theme examined

2.3.1 Scouting seen as part of the Warbottle   
 entertainment system

2.3.2 Scouting seen as part of the Warbottle   
 education system

2.4 Themes and reality compared – the lessons

2.4.1 Some issues that seem to be significant

2.4.2 Some suggestions for how to promote   
 further discussion of these issues   
 among the Warbottle scout troops

3.0 Summary of conclusions

Appendix 1: Some technical notes on the method used   
 (re. Section 2.1)

Appendix 2: Warbottle membership figures – 1900–1985   
 (re. Section 2.2.1)

References

End of Computer Display

End of Box

Although there are only three levels of numbered headings in the outline above, the spray diagram in Figure 3.1 shows that within each block of text the material is further divided up into finer divisions. These finer divisions may be self-evident to the reader as a group of paragraphs without headings. If you do use headings below, say, 2.2.2, these should be unnumbered.

The outline also suggests the spray diagram is still too complex. For instance it’s unlikely that the ‘Marketing’ branch can be squeezed into the word-count ration available; at the very least the words will have to be augmented by diagrams.

Obviously you should adopt clear format conventions to identify each level of heading. Look at how this guide uses headings for its three levels of section.

Once you have achieved a suitable overall structure, the report should be much easier to write. However, you should still expect at least a couple of iterations before you can produce a really logical and well-integrated flow.

Always read over carefully what you have written and try to think of things you may have left out, or of ways to make it clearer. If you have time, it is better to leave a gap of a few days before rereading so that you come back to it with a fresh eye. It also helps to get someone else to read it and comment on it.

## 3.4 Using diagrams

Pictures and diagrams are usually an important element of any report. In some disciplines certain types of diagrams may actually be a core part of the project.

But even in disciplines where diagrams are illustrative rather than central, well-chosen charts and figures can make an immense difference to the readability and ease of comprehension of reports.

Here are some general guidelines.

1. Aim for a reasonable balance between diagrams and text. A diagram needs to be close to the text it relates to, but if you have too many diagrams this will be impossible.
2. There is no such thing as an all-purpose diagram. Decide what you want the diagram to show, and design it to do so.
3. Use diagrams where they will help you to make your point more clearly – don’t just throw them in for their own sake.
4. Give each diagram a title or caption and refer to it in the text to make it clear where it fits into your written presentation. Explain the diagram: ‘See Figure 1’ is not usually enough to let the reader understand your diagram or why you have included it.

Once again, some simple arithmetic can help you to get a sense of balance between diagrams and text. For instance, suppose you have allocated yourself 10 pages of pure text to the central section of the report. With, say, 5–10 half-page illustrations that will expand to 15 pages, and will provide on average a figure on every other page – about as many as this format can take. To have more, you would have to make special arrangements such as grouping blocks of illustrations together or putting them in an appendix.

## 3.5 Styles

Many writers have set down their thoughts on good style. Typically their recommendations range from a few well-chosen sentences to long tracts that are too detailed for anyone to absorb. Some of the best advice was given by George Orwell (1946). His rules, and the essay they are taken from, have been reprinted many times in books about writing style. They are:

Start of Quote

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Orwell (1946)

End of Quote

Some of these rules are a bit technical. Number one is a warning to avoid hackneyed turns of phrase, for example ‘at the end of the day’, when used to mean ‘finally’ or ‘taking account of everything’. Number four recommends verb forms like ‘we put the book on the table’ (active) rather than ‘the book was put on the table’ (passive). Passive constructions are impersonal and often more complicated than active constructions. Scientific and technical reports traditionally use the passive, and it would be unwise to ignore this tradition if you are writing technical reports for publication.

In framing these rules, Orwell was driven by his belief that unclear writing came from unclear, and possibly devious, thinking. His aim was to encourage a transparent, concise, unadorned style, readily understandable by anyone. Whether such a style can be achieved by following five rules and an escape clause is debatable; but the rules are a start, and you should take them in that spirit rather than as a universal prescription.

## 3.6 Conclusion

Once you have a full-length draft of your report that says what you want it to say, it is worth going over it again to polish up its structure, conventions, and language.

This is also a good point to reflect on what you have done. You need to be able to look calmly and objectively at your work, preferably after a break of several days. Spend a reasonable amount of time on this important part of the process. Read it over and check for the following.

### Structure

* Are any of the sections and subsections out of proportion in length or weight?
* Do ideas flow on logically and smoothly from one another?
* Is there a clear structure of headings and subheadings, and does each heading accurately and helpfully describe what is in the section to which it applies?
* Is there a contents page? Does the contents list match the headings in the report and give an informative overview of the structure of the report?
* Is the structure of the report logically developed?
* Does the report have unity and coherence? Does it hang together?

### Conventions, courtesies, and consistencies

* Are terms used consistently?
* Are references properly cited?
* Are diagrams, tables, etc. properly labelled and numbered?
* Are contributions by other people – including other students – properly acknowledged?
* Do any quotations used really fit and are they accurate?

### Use of language

* Is your spelling correct?
* Are punctuation and capitalisation correct?
* Are sentences and paragraphs of a suitable length?
* Are there any long-winded parts that you can shorten?
* Are there any ambiguous phrases that need to be clarified?
* Are there any unnecessary repetitions?
* Are your words appropriate for the ideas you want to express?
* Are technical terms used correctly?

## 4 Checking, correcting and evaluating

All written work needs careful checking for accuracy. Automatic spelling checkers are a useful aid provided you remember that they cannot identify words by context. The sentence, ‘we are going two the railway station’, is, of course, incorrect. However, ‘two’ would not be flagged as misspelt. Automatic grammar and style checkers are sometimes used but vary considerably in effectiveness. They are mainly of use if a writer has severe difficulties in writing correct English. They are not yet noticeably good at dealing with very subtle matters of English usage.

Checking your own work for style and clarity is essential. You can benefit by waiting a day or so after writing it; the detachment you gain allows you to look at your own work in a new light. It is quite surprising how you can then pick up errors and misleading expressions, almost as if you are checking someone else’s work. Additionally, if possible, persuade a colleague to offer constructive criticism.

## Correctness

Sorting out grammar, spelling and punctuation is another part of editing. The English language, like all living languages, has changed through history, and continues to change. Many perfectly acceptable words and phrases were once thought outlandish. This has led some people to suppose that the very idea of correctness is mistaken. However, communication requires the observance of certain conventions, and if the conventions are not observed, the result may be ambiguity or obscurity. Under these circumstances the reader is likely to be distracted, confused and irritated.

There are also other reasons for trying to achieve a reasonable standard of correctness:

* sloppy and unclear writing is a sign of disrespect to your audience
* grammatical and spelling errors are likely to undermine the authority of what you say.

The Appendix to this guide looks briefly at a few of the common traps in writing.

## Critical evaluation to check that your writing is appropriate to your audience

Most importantly, if an explanation is aimed at a particular audience, then a representative sample of that audience should test it. In many cases this is vital. Consider the effectiveness of safety precautions written by the acknowledged expert, but not completely understood by users. The author is not necessarily in a position to understand fully the minds of the audience. Missing out something that seems obvious to the expert may cause confusion in the minds of the audience. Unless you have carried out thorough testing ‘in the field’, you can never be sure if your work is entirely meaningful to its target audience.

Evaluate your report using the following criteria.

* Is the material presented in an appropriate order?
* Are the style, sentence length and vocabulary appropriate for the audience and purpose?
* Does the explanation meet the reader’s needs?
* Is the style constant throughout the document?
* Are there any specialist terms that need explaining?
* Is the material accurate?
* Are there any errors of spelling, grammar and punctuation?
* Are there any instructions that could be unclear or ambiguous?
* Are the diagrams and tables clear and accurate?
* Is there any text that would be better as a diagram or table (or vice versa)?
* Has anything been omitted?

## 5 Conclusion

Rather than try to summarise this document, here is some advice about revising and editing your own written work.

1. Don’t start revising as soon as you have finished a draft. Allow several hours or, better, days to pass, and allow time between each revision. Your revisions will be better if you return to your work afresh.
2. Expect to revise your work many times. It is quite usual to spend much more time revising a document than was spent writing the first draft.
3. In first revisions concentrate on the organisation and structure of your material. Read critically, as though for the first time. Is there a clear structure? Is there a logical development of ideas?
4. During later revisions concentrate on points of style, grammar, punctuation, consistency of style, references, mathematical convention and layout, and so on. At this stage you will be so familiar with the material that you may miss spelling mistakes and garbled or faulty sentences. It can be helpful to change the layout of the text (a different font or size or column width) to make it look unfamiliar. Reading the text aloud can help to highlight difficult sentences.
5. At all stages it can be very helpful to get a friend or colleague to comment on your draft. Another pair of eyes will invariably spot things that yours miss. It is generally true that everything published professionally in books or journals will have been looked at many times by many people.
6. If you can get other people to read your draft, brief them very clearly about what you want them to comment on. With early drafts your readers should usually be more concerned with your ideas and your structure than with your grammar and spelling. If you don’t give a clear briefing, you are likely to get your draft back with just its spelling and grammatical errors marked up.
7. It can be helpful to get a subject specialist to look at your work, particularly if there is technical content (such as mathematics) that you are not confident about. However, you will often find that you need to interpret a specialist’s comments carefully and diplomatically. Quite often their more helpful advice will be buried among other suggestions that are inappropriate for what you are trying to do.
8. Reading a draft critically can take a lot of time and effort. Beware of imposing too much on other people’s generosity if you ask them to read your work.

## Appendix: Some common writing traps

## Consistency

One of the things that distinguishes professionally produced publications from non-professional ones is the degree of care over certain details. For example, if a book or magazine title is referred to in a professionally produced document, its title will almost certainly be given consistently in italics.

To ensure that such details are treated consistently throughout a publication, the publisher will issue an author with what is called a house style. Alternatively, the publisher’s copy-editor may impose a house style on the author’s work during editing, prior to publication.

A house style usually takes the form of a short booklet of rules. To a considerable extent the rules are arbitrary. They are intended to ensure consistency rather than correctness.

In your own work, when you are submitting written work for assessment, it is advisable to prepare your work as though you were following a publisher’s house style. That means adopting a consistent treatment for the points below.

## Bold

Bold is often used in headings – as you can see in this document. Within continuous text, as opposed to headings, bold text is generally used for two main functions. The first is to indicate key terms, perhaps the first time they appear. The second is to lend emphasis to a word or phrase. The latter use is best employed sparingly.

## Capitals

In addition to their use for proper names, capitals are often used in cases like the following:

Start of Quote

Section 4; Block 6; Chapter 12; Figure 3; Table 3.

End of Quote

But in an unspecific reference to a section, block, chapter, and so on, it is advisable to use lower case. For example:

Start of Quote

this section; this block; the last chapter; the following figure; the table below.

End of Quote

Avoid using capital letters for emphasis.

## Figures and tables

Some publishers refer to all illustrations, whether drawn or photographic, as figures. It is common (but not universal) for a publisher to insist that all figures be numbered, and to insist that every figure be referred to by number somewhere in the main text, so that the reader knows when to look at a figure. Another common demand is that every figure should have a caption below or alongside it consisting of at least ‘Figure X’, where X is the figure number, and possibly a short phrase or sentence of explanation.

Various conventions exist for numbering figures. A common convention is that all figures should be numbered in a single sequence throughout the document (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, etc.). Alternatively, a sectional numbering system may be used, for example Figure 3.14, Figure 3.15, etc., which are respectively the fourteenth and fifteenth figures of Section 3.

Tables are often handled in a similar way to figures, but numbered in a separate sequence. That is, Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, or Table 3.1, Table 3.2, Table 3.3, for example.

## Footnotes and endnotes

It is advisable to keep these to a minimum as they disrupt the flow. Footnotes may be numbered or, if unnumbered, indicated by an asterisk. If more than one unnumbered footnote appears on a page, the following sequence of symbols is recommended: \* for the first footnote; † for the second; ‡ for the third; § for the fourth.

Endnotes, which go at the end of a section or a document, are usually numbered.

## Full stops and abbreviations

Many publishers have adopted the convention of using a full stop after an abbreviation (exam., prep., e.g., i.e., etc.), but not after a contraction. A contraction is a shortening that retains the initial and final letters of the original word. Thus: Dr, Mr, Mrs are often not given a full stop.

Nowadays it is usual not to put a full stop in capital-letter abbreviations. For example, OU, BA, BBC, UK, USA, TV.

## Italics

It is almost universal practice to italicise foreign words and phrases, unless they are thoroughly anglicised. Thus,

Start of Quote

et seq., trompe l’œil

End of Quote

but

Start of Quote

ad hoc, kindergarten, rendezvous.

End of Quote

Similarly, it is customary to italicise titles of books, plays, works of art, and so on. For example: Hamlet, A Tale of Two Cities, Gone with the Wind, Journal of Chemical Engineering.

Italic may be used for emphasis, but should be used sparingly.

## Numerals

Many publishers prefer to spell out numbers smaller than 10. Thus:

Start of Quote

we saw three ships

End of Quote

not

Start of Quote

we saw 3 ships

End of Quote

However, in text with a significant statistical content, numerals may be more appropriate:

Start of Quote

There were 6 candidates under the age of 21, and 14 candidates aged between 21 and 45.

End of Quote

Also, use numerals before unit symbols or abbreviations: 5 kg, 9%.

It is not a good idea to start a sentence with a numeral: spell out the number instead.

## Quotations

Short quotations are generally embedded within ordinary text paragraphs, and enclosed within quotation marks, like this: ‘we wandered lonely as a cloud’.

With long quotations, say 20 words or more, it is usually desirable to make a clearer distinction between the quoted text and the text framing it. This is usually done by putting the quoted material in an indented paragraph by itself. Often the text is also put into a different font or size, or both. For example:

Start of Quote

Here is a long quotation. It is a separate, indented paragraph. Notice that it has no quotation marks: if the typographic style for quotations is sufficiently distinct from that of the surrounding text, quotation marks are unnecessary.

End of Quote

The source of the quotation can have a separate line.

Generally quotations must be reproduced unchanged from the version in the source document. It is permissible to make minor changes so that the quotation conforms to your chosen style or to rectify obvious spelling mistakes. Any more significant alteration needs to be indicated in some way. The most likely alteration you will want to make to a quotation is either the omission of parts that are not relevant or the insertion of a phrase of clarification. Usually these alterations are indicated by the use of square brackets. For instance, to show that something has been removed:

Start of Quote

Never […] was so much owed by so many to so few.

End of Quote

To show an insertion:

Start of Quote

The attempt to show the relationship [in eleven-year-olds] between …

End of Quote

All quotations must be accompanied by some form of reference that enables the reader to find the original text.

## Quotation marks

Modern practice is to use single quotes around a quotation, unless it is a long quotation displayed as described above.

For a quotation within a quotation, double quotes should be used for the inner quotation if the outer quotation is indicated with single quotes. Some publishers reverse this procedure and use double quotes for the outer quotation and single quotes for the inner quotation. Either is acceptable.

Quotation marks are usually used when referring to an article, part, section or chapter within a larger work. For instance:

Start of Quote

Have you read ‘Water Found on Mars’ in this week’s New Scientist?

End of Quote

Start of Quote

He was humming ‘Tonight’ from West Side Story.

End of Quote

## Sections

It is usual to use decimal numbering to show the structure of section subheadings. For example:

Start of Quote

**2 Food**

2.1 Vegetables

First sentence of text about vegetables.

2.2 Fruit

2.2.1 Cherries

First sentence of text about cherries.

End of Quote

Many publishers advise authors not to continue the numbering beyond the third level.

## Styling

Use a font that is clear and legible and keep the main text on a size between 10 and 12. Use black as the font colour against a a white background.

Layouts should be clean and simple with appropriate spacing.

## Variant spellings

For some words, variant spellings are possible (e.g. judgement and judgment). A reasonable policy is to follow the first choice of the Concise Oxford Dictionary, or simply to decide which you prefer and stick to it consistently.

Other variant spellings are caused by the equally acceptable use of ‘s’ or ‘z’ in the endings of certain words; for example, organize/organise, organization/organisation. There is a widespread misapprehension that the ‘z’ version is an American spelling. In fact, the use of the ‘z’ spelling has a long history in British English.

In your own work, the important point is to adopt either the -ise ending or the -ize ending and to stick to it consistently. However, if you adopt the -ize ending, remember that there are a few words for which an -ize ending is considered incorrect in British English for etymological reasons. The commonest of these are:

Start of Table

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| advertise | comprise | devise | franchise | revise |
| advise | compromise | enterprise | improvise | supervise |
| apprise | demise | excise | incise | surmise |
| chastise | despise | exercise | premise | surprise |

End of Table

Note also that analyse, catalyse and paralyse should not be spelt with a ‘z’ in British English.

## Reference

Orwell, G. (1946) ‘Politics and the English Language’, Horizon, April.

# Figure 3.1

## Description

Figure 3.1 is a spray diagram. It is included as an example, so the complete detail is not described. The subject of the diagram, ‘Warbottle Scout recruitment’, is contained in a rectangle near the centre of the diagram. Four lines radiate from the rectangle – one from each side. These lines are labelled: ‘Method of analysis (2.1 and Appendix)’, ‘Present Situation (2.2)’, ‘Themes (2.3)’ and ‘Future Options (2.4)’. The numbers in parentheses represent sections of a report. Each of the four radiating lines branches into a tree structure and each branch has a label. For example, ‘Themes’ branches into ‘Entertainment’, ‘Education’ and ‘Marketing’. Each of these branches divides into sub-branches. Some of the final branches have underlined labels. For example, one of the final branches under ‘Themes’ is ‘State system’, which is underlined.

The line ‘Future Options’ branches into ‘Who?’, ‘When?’, ‘How?’, ‘What?’ and an underlined branch labelled ‘See underlined items on other branches’.

[Back to - Figure 3.1](" \l "Session3_Figure1)