Get Started Easily and Naturally

Step 1

Overview

Answer a few questions to clarify your message.

Overcome writer’s block—write like you speak.

Jump-start your writing through outlining, freewriting, or a structured process.

The blank screen is staring back at you. How should you start?

Many writers—including journalists, novelists, and bloggers—frequently struggle to figure out what they’re going to say and how they’re going to say it. If you have a get-started system that works, more power to you. But if you spend too much time looking at a blank screen, check out the strategies that follow.

Start With a Few Basic Questions

Begin with what you know. To help define your purpose and message, answer these questions:

What is the situation, problem, or issue that is prompting you to write?

Who is going to read it?

What do your readers need to know?

What action do you want your readers to take?

To see how these questions help you begin writing, let’s say that your company’s travel costs are too high and your boss, a senior executive, has demanded that expenses be reduced. That’s the answer to question 1—the problem that prompts you to write. So you need to inform the division heads who report to you that travel costs must be lowered and explain the recommended measures to achieve this goal.

The answer to question 2 (who are your readers?) is your direct reports. For your readers to act on this request, they need to know several things (question 3):

Travel expenses rose 30 percent—$175,000—this year, compared with the same period last year.

Your division must lower travel costs by at least $100,000 next year.

Working with the Finance team, we’ve come up with three steps to achieve this goal:

videoconferencing sales meetings every other month

booking plane tickets two months ahead of travel to take advantage of lower fares

arranging for group rates at hotels specifically serving business travelers instead of at higher-priced properties.

When your readers have grasped that information, you want them to take these steps (question 4):

Let me know by February 1 if you can implement these steps and be able to save $100,000 or more next year.

Contact me if you have any questions or if you need to schedule a call to discuss the proposal.

By answering these four key questions, you’ve virtually drafted the entire email. It’s not always that easy, especially with complex documents, but answering the questions can often help you get started writing faster.

Write Like You Speak

This might sound counterintuitive. Many people try not to write like they talk. They believe that they speak in language that’s disjointed and too informal for written business communication. But that’s not normally the case. Saying your message out loud can free you to express your thoughts in a clear, uncomplicated manner. In my 20 years of one-on-one writing coaching, this type of conversation keeps repeating itself:

Me: I don’t understand what you’re trying to say in this paragraph.

Individual: I’m trying to say “this,” “this,” and “this” (each representing a concept).

Me: Then write “this,” “this,” and “this”!

Pointer

If you’re stuck getting started, write the words you’d use in a conversation.

Most people find talking easier than writing. And their spoken language is typically more straightforward and concise than their written text. So if you’re ever stuck on what to write, think about how you’d say it in an oral conversation. Then move those naturally flowing words from your lips to the keyboard, and make a few edits as needed. This goes back to the essence of business writing—conveying your message as simply as you can.

The following example illustrates how writing what you would instinctively say out loud can help overcome writer’s block. You’re about to start writing an email to your supervisor, summarizing yesterday’s meeting about strategies for LX Partners, one of your company’s most important clients. No one else from your firm attended the meeting. While staring at the screen, you get a frantic call from your supervisor.

“Listen,” he says, “LX Partners wants me to be on a conference call in two minutes and I have no idea what happened at yesterday’s meeting. You were there. I need you to tell me—in 60 seconds—what was decided and what are the next steps!

Talk about being put on the spot. But that’s good, because your boss’s demand for the bottom-line information in one minute forces you to get to the point and omit the unimportant details.

After a few moments of panic, you intuitively focus on the relevant information you know he wants and reply, “LX Partners has had three system-level security breaches in the past six months. In the meeting, I recommended that LX invest $200,000 on a new software system that would prevent breaches at the application level. This purchase needs to be approved by April 1 to be fully operational by July 1.”

The takeaway: If you’re forced to be concise, you will be concise! So approach every email, text, and document with the same urgency you’d feel if the reader were talking to you on the phone or standing beside your desk impatiently waiting for your spoken answer. And write it like you’d say it!

Develop an Outline for Complex Documents

The traditional outline you learned somewhere between grade school and high school can still work well, especially for longer documents like proposals, procedures, and reports. Start with general categories and then incorporate more specific ones. Example 1-1 shows how an outline could be developed.

Feel free to use roman numerals or any combination of bullets, letters, and numerals that’s clear to you. Remember, readers will only see your final document, not all the drafts you use to get there.

Example 1-1

Outline of Plan to Outsource Training

Purpose: Suggest outsourcing time management training

List simple, general categories:

Introduction: recommend outsourcing time management training

Why we need it

Implementing the training

Benefits of outsourced versus in-house training

Cost

Next steps

Expand categories with more details:

Introduction: recommend outsourcing time management training

Why we need it

Staff works inefficiently

Too many projects behind schedule

In-house training is not practical

Implementing the training

Suppliers (training firms) that would meet our needs

Supplier A: pros and cons

Supplier B: pros and cons

Supplier C: pros and cons

Setting objectives

Scheduling

Evaluation and follow-up

Benefits of outsourcing the training

Staff working 15 percent more efficiently

Better morale

Greater productivity

Cost

Facilitation fees

Video tutorials

Other expenses

Next steps

Management approval

Selecting a supplier

Scheduling training

Developing evaluation method

<end>

For more about organizing your text, see step 4 (Organize to Promote Understanding).

Freewriting: Your Personal Brainstorm

Another method for getting started is called freewriting, because it frees you from all those constraints of writing—spelling, grammar, sentence structure, organization, and your own judgment—that can stifle your ability to crank out the right words. When you freewrite on a topic, you just unleash your thoughts and get them down on paper as quickly as you can. What you write can be cut, organized, and better expressed later. What matters is that you dump out all your thoughts about the subject—and then feel good because you started.

Pointer

To freewrite, just write down your thoughts on the topic.

Here’s what freewriting might produce for a blog on effective customer service over the phone:

Customer service over the phone stinks in most cases. Companies don’t put enough effort to training the reps or they don’t teach the right skills. Most people can’t stand talking to service reps over the phone. It’s so frustrating—I’ve had to do it and what a waste of time. What kills me is the phoniness of it all. Those reps sound like robots. “Yes, I’ll be happy to help you with that,” or some other canned response. These reps don’t really listen to what you say—they may hear but they don’t really listen. And they’ve got this surly attitude that makes the customer feel like chopped liver.

Be real, be genuine—that’s the way to service customers. There’s actually a simple step to come across more friendly over the phone and show that you’re willing to solve their problem. Smile—yea, just smile! It actually releases endorphins that put you in a better mood. And you know that customers will sense that when they hear your voice. Reps need to ask better questions. If their questions were better, they’d get to the crux of the customer’s problem sooner. I couldn’t believe when I heard that 84 percent of people said their expectations weren’t exceeded in their last customer service interaction. That’s from Harvard Business Review. Reps should show more empathy and let customers know that they feel the person’s frustration.

Poor customer service can be brutal to companies. People stop buying products when service is lousy. I couldn’t believe when I read that a lot people who were going to purchase something decided not to because of poor customer service. It was more than half—55 percent—according to American Express. Corporate America isn’t doing enough about this—and they’re missing a huge opportunity. Effective customer service promotes additional purchases. And here’s a hopeful stat: 73 percent of consumers say customer service reps who are friendly (not easy to find!) can make them fall in love with a brand, according to RightNow Technologies. That’s huge!

While it’s an extremely rough draft, it’s a start.

To create order from the chaos of your freewritten document, read it over and pick out the key points you need to communicate to readers. When put into a logical order, these points will form your outline. Using the previous freewritten paragraph, you might create this outline:

<this needs to be a bulleted list with the extract style>

Poor customer service on the phone: a critical business problem

Alarming statistics on cost to corporate America

55 percent of consumers who intended to make a purchase backed out because of poor customer service. (American Express)

84 percent of consumers said that their expectations hadn’t been exceeded in their last customer service interaction (Harvard Business Review)

Lack of adequate training

Consumers’ most frequent complaints about reps

Phony, canned replies

Failure to listen

Surly attitude

Best practices for customer service over the phone

Smile to elevate mood

Ask good questions

Show empathy

Huge opportunity for companies

Promote additional purchases

Build loyalty—73 percent of consumers say friendly service reps can make them fall in love with a brand (RightNow)

Now you’ve got the framework from which to write sentences and paragraphs that are arranged in a logical sequence.

Use a More Structured Process

Certain writers feel more comfortable with a clearly defined step-by-step process that they follow from topic development to finished document. And some instructors (not me) believe that writers should follow the same process for virtually everything they write. However you feel about that, a structured process can be an excellent tool when completing certain documents, especially the longer ones. If you want a process to follow, see the steps outlined in Tool 1-1. Modify the steps based on your own style.

Tool 1-1

A Structured Process for Preparing Your Text

Determine the purpose. (What is the situation, problem, or issue to be addressed, and why are you writing the document?)

Analyze the audience.

Identify the key points to convey.

Identify the action you want readers to take.

Develop an outline.

Write the first draft.

Revise the first draft for message, organization, and mechanics.

Make the document visually appealing.

Proofread.<end>

Your Turn

You can use many strategies to get started, including answering your own questions, using a simple outline, and freewriting. To practice different strategies, try these exercises:

Think of the next email you need to write. From your answers to the following questions, develop a simple outline:

Why are you writing this message?

Who is your audience?

What do your readers want to know?

What actions do you want your readers to take?

Read over a report or lengthy email you wrote within the past six months. Imagine that you had just 30 seconds to explain the key message to a colleague waiting on the phone. Come up with the words you’d use and say them aloud. See if you got to the point faster in your imaginary conversation than you did in your text.

Review the freewriting below and see if you can develop a practical outline from it. Remember that certain points should be omitted and that some ideas may be repeated at different points of the document.

Finally, yea, we’re addressing a problem, three years what a pain in getting stuff in the hands of customers in the southwest states. So many of them have a fit when the products take as long as two weeks to arrive, can’t have that no way. Everyone has their own idea about which city to open the new distribution center. Carlos Molina says Phoenix is the Mecca of the southwest, I don’t know where he gets that from, aside from thinking about going to some Phoenix Suns basketball games. I’m not saying Phoenix doesn’t have pluses, like an able workforce, so we could easily fill the jobs, I don’t know maybe 20 to 30. Whatever city it is, we’ve got to move on it, management wants it fully operational by July 1 of next year, nine months from now. So decision time is upon us, by about start of Oct. Construction’s gotta start no later than Feb. 1. At least weather is less of an issue in Phoenix, and with the other places in the southwest too. I say we hold a meeting with all the marketing and operations managers by this Friday, that’s Oct. 5, discuss it, have everyone do their research and come back in three weeks so we can vote and get that decision done so we can move forward.

Amber Nassar will be at the meeting. She’s been touting Santa Fe as this enchanted city, she’s traveled there quite a bit. Actually, New Mexico is known as the land of enchantment, but who cares if they charge so much for rent, a helluva lot more than Phoenix for some unknown reason. Management wants good reasons for our decision, so we gotta go way beyond “enchantment.” The best thing about Santa Fe is that they got the absolute perfect spot for the distribution center, I mean right off the highway and near a shopping center and if we ever have to visit, some outstanding pubs, but maybe I should leave this out of the next draft, I don’t want anyone thinking my priorities aren’t in the right place. Then you got good old Tucson, which has always had that weird quality to me. The guy in Chicago, I don’t know him very well, Pete Marcus, thinks Tucson is hands-down the best place. Pros, the lowest rent and lowest construction costs. The cons, the location identified is hard to get to, 15 miles off the highway, on a treacherous 2-lane curvy hilly road.

The Next Step

Once you’ve gotten your ideas on the screen or on paper, you need to write in a way that’s easily understood, using as few words as possible. That’s what we’ll cover in step 2 (Be Concise, Explicit, and Clear).