*Starting to write: a practical approach*

The next task the writer faces is turning this preparatory work into an actual document. You are not alone if you tend to delay your start on writing. The vast majority of writers find getting the words flowing difficult; it may comfort you to know that we found it difficult to get started on this book about writing. The solution to the problem of procrastination is not to worry about your hesitation. Hesitation is normal and nearly universal.

Writers create the problem themselves by facing the task in the wrong way. They sit down, take out a sheet of clean, white paper, and only then do they start to think. Their position reminds us of a man who has been left to make his own supper for the first time. He first of all gets out a clean plate, and puts it on the table in front of him; then he sits and stares at it, and wonders why the meal does not suddenly appear by inspiration. Such behaviour is absurd, of course, but it approximates very closely to the behaviour of the writer, panicking over an empty sheet of paper. The paper is like a plate, merely a receptacle for what has been carefully prepared *before*. Writing is a process of dishing up information. It is the last thing you do, and in itself is perhaps one of the easiest of the tasks. ecause the writer’s problem in getting started is a psychological one, we suggest psychological solutions. We have a ‘seven-point’ plan. We have alreadytaken you through the first two stages of this plan. First, analyse your aim; preferably write it down. Already the act of formulating words has started the flow of language. Already you have some phrases which can be worked into the final text. Second, consider your audience. Thinking about their needs will help you to orientate your information in a way which is reassuringly planned and decisive.

***Stage three— make a plan***

Probably all of us were told in school that we should plan our writing. But few of us do. The common excuse for not making a plan is that it absorbs time; why not get straight on with the job? But when no plan is prepared, more time is wasted coping with mental blockages than would have been used in planning. Even if you feel you have a clear picture in your mind of the shape of the document, a plan is worthwhile. Do not expect the plan to come out in perfect order at the first attempt. Remember you will rarely be working from scratch. You will almost always

have a preliminary structure provided by the brief for the job, the laboratory logbook containing observations and results, some details obtained from sources in a library, a computer print-out, some working drawings, or a set of instructions.

To make the plan, one method we find helpful is to take a large sheet of paper and write the major headings spaced out down the page. Then go systematically through your notes, using some system of numbering or cross-referencing to note each point down in turn on this sheet. Thus, the first point in your notes might be

best placed in the fourth section, the next point might be for the conclusion, the next for the introduction, and so on. In this way you will gradually fill the blank sheet with key words and phrases to remind you of what needs to go into each section. In practice, any system of shorthand and sorting will do. Highly disciplined writers use separate index-cards for gathering notes for each chapter or section. Others finish up with several sheets of paper, with headings, notes, quotations and references scribbled in all directions. They then sort them by allocating numbers to the points in the sequence they want. Usually there are several false starts and many transfers and additions while the sequencing is going on. But eventually some sort of order begins to emerge. Everyone gets stuck with pen poised and a thought half-formed at some stage or other. But do not let that block the planning and preparation stages of your work. If one train of thought sticks or collapses, leave it for the time being and follow up another. And if a thought occurs to you that does not belong to the section you are thinking through at the moment, do not ignore it as inconvenient —make a note of it, anywhere on your paper, so that it does not get lost.

In the end, you will have a sheet of paper that looks as if a spider has been at work. It would be no use to anyone but you, but for you it has done two jobs. First, it has set out your considered decision about the ordering of the individual points as well as the main sections, and it has done this in a way which makes sure none of them is forgotten or overlooked. Second, by going through the notes again you have reminded yourself about the details of the work. You are ready to start writing, with all the details fresh. If you do not make a plan, and go straight into writing a draft, you may often find that your progress is blocked by nagging worries about whether a particular

point should be made at a given stage or saved until later. If you decide to save it, will it be forgotten when the time comes? Will you even remember the phrasing which came to mind when you first considered it? While these worries are in your mind, you are distracted from getting on with the writing. By planning, you achieve confidence in the order. The tactic is to divide and conquer. In writing, no one decision is overwhelmingly difficult; but trying to make several at once soon leaves the mind exhausted and confused, and the

writing grinds to a halt.

***Stage four— discuss a synopsis***

You are not unusual if you find it hard to impose order and exact expression on your ideas. Most of us do. And given ten writers, it is likely that they will produce ten different flows of thought. All of these could be equally good; but it is likely that one or two would be tactically more effective than the others. So, if you have the time and the opportunity, it is useful to make a fair copy of your plan, expanding cryptic notes and key words into a form comprehensible to others. This synopsis can then be discussed with colleagues and friends (if they

will listen); their ideas and advice can be very helpful. It is not an admission of weakness to ask for help in planning and preparing the presentation of material to other people. And it is not an affront to your professional integrity to have someone say that he or she cannot grasp what you mean by a set of notes or by a trial page of text. As we write, our minds get set on particular lines of thought, and we unconsciously ignore side-issues or mentally supply steps in an argument. To someone else, the gaps in our thought are obvious at once. Someone else sees implications other than those that stuck in our minds. Points that seemed implicit from our standpoint are often not at all obvious when viewed from someone else’s frame of reference.

One tactic we recommend at this stage is that you contact the person who

commissioned the document, the manager (or client, editor, or symposium

organizer) who is most directly concerned, and ask if he or she can spare ten

minutes to discuss the synopsis with you. This tactic has advantages for both of

you. The manager can see that the work is progressing; there is often a silent

period between the completion of the research and the arrival of the document,

when much may be happening in the writer’s mind but there is no external

evidence of activity. A synopsis is reassuring evidence of progress. The manager

will find it impressive to see such indisputable signs of organization and method

in the writer.

A second advantage to the manager is also an advantage to you. He or she can

see what is going to be produced, and check that it is in line with the sort of

document required—that it is angled in the desired way, and that it will answer

all relevant questions. He or she can correct any wrong turnings (and so refine

and clarify the specification, which may have been vague in the original

briefing). The writer gains confidence; and in writing as in so many other things,

confidence is a great help to good performance. Knowing that the final document

will be acceptable, the writer is more likely to write with speed and assurance.

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***Stage five— draft the text***

Now, and only now, the time has come to start drafting the text. Notice that

already you are two-thirds of the way through the work; writing is now a

question of ‘dishing-up’, since the most important decisions about content and

order have already been taken. Time spent in preparation of your synopsis will

now be amply repaid as you come to clothe the outline with words. For most of

us, uncertainty about which words to use stems mainly from uncertainty about

what we want to say. Usually, if we have the underlying framework of our ideas

straight, the writing of the first full prose draft can go ahead much more confidently

and rapidly than if we are still trying to work out what sequence of statements we

should make.

Aim to get the most rapid possible flow of ideas on to the paper at each

preliminary sitting. Your mind can work at a vastly greater speed than your

hand. So do not try to write a full text in ‘good English’; do not stop to formulate

delicate nuances of expression or to debate whether a given sequence of

statements would be best punctuated with colons, commas or full stops. First, get

down a flow of words.

Note that we talked of ‘each preliminary sitting’. Sometimes, pressure is great

and it is necessary to try to complete a report or paper at a single sitting. But,

normally, productivity falls as time progresses and you will use your time more

profitably if you plan to work for several separated blocks of one or two hours,

not straight through one or two days. It is best to switch from writing to a

different task and then back again, if possible; but even to change from one

writing task to another is helpful in clearing blocked lines of thought and helping

you forward with new impetus.

Remember that there is a further revision to come. Leaving blanks—with

hasty notes about a point you want to look up later —prevents your mind being

diverted. Ignore problems of spelling, punctuation, and grammar; do not worry

too much about ‘good style’ at this stage. Few writers produce perfect, incisive

phrasing first time. The first aim is to get words on paper. If you are dissatisfied

with a particular formulation, and think of a better way, carry on and write it

down. In revision these two attempts can be pondered over, and the better one

chosen; perhaps you will ultimately combine the two sets of phrases into

something better than either. The main thing is not to lose impetus.

A final point about writing a draft: do not feel you must always start at the

beginning. Worries over the opening paragraph cause more delays than anything

else. The best place to start writing is the section where you have the most secure

grasp of the content, and feel most confident. Start the next section on a fresh

sheet of paper. Do not necessarily follow the sequence of the final document, but

follow the sequence of your confidence. It is best to write the conclusion next to

last, and the introduction or opening section last of all. All that remains when the

whole document is drafted is to shuffle the pages into the final order, as decided

in your planning stage, and the main part of the task is over.

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Many people resist writing drafts because they feel it is a waste of time. But

unless the document is little more than an extended memo, drafting makes the

task easier for the writer, because the process has been divided up. Decisions

about selection and order have already been taken before drafting starts.

Decisions about the exact choices of words have been pushed forward in time.

The effect is like replacing a high jump by a series of small hurdles. Divided up

in this way, the components of the writing process can be dealt with in the course

of the normal day’s work.

***Stage six— forget it!***

Try to leave the draft for a few days, or at least overnight. Then, when you look

at it again, you will have forgotten the precise line of thought that was in your

mind on the day you wrote it— what you *meant* to say! You will be obliged to

look more closely at what the words on the page actually *do say*. We recognize

that pressures of work frequently do not allow this approach. Often, it is not

possible to leave a draft even overnight before having it finally copied and issued.

In those circumstances, before you issue your text, it is essential to make a

conscious effort to step back from your work and review it. Such self-editing is

never easy. When you have just finished writing, your mind is still full of the

implications you meant to put into the text.

A considerable conscious effort is required to ask: if I were reading this for the

first time, what would the words on the page really say? Unfortunately, we know

of no secret technique for doing this. All we can recommend is that you

deliberately build into your working habits the self-discipline of conscious reappraisal

of each major piece of writing. If you do, you will be well on the way

to producing effective writing.

***Stage seven— revise and edit***

Revising, like other writing tasks, is best done in stages. First read through the

draft without stopping. This enables you to perceive the overall flow of ideas and

information. We suggest that at this stage you simply draw a line in the margin

against passages which need more careful attention later. You can also circle

words with doubtful spelling, constructions which need tidying up, and facts

which need checking. If you go any further than such simple marks at this stage,

you will blunt your judgement of the effective flow of thought.

Next, work through the difficulties you noted at the first reading. Again, it is

usually best to do this in stages. Spend some time reflecting on the passages

which need restructuring; then work through the facts which need checking,

perhaps in the library, or with your laboratory note-book beside you. Finally, turn

your attention to the style and to the mechanics of language.

You will find the ‘scissors and paste’ technique useful at this stage. Where a

set of points needs restructuring, try cutting them up into separate strips of paper.

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You can then make trial assemblies of them on your desk. When you are

satisfied, paste, Sellotape, paper-clips, or staples can be used to fix them on to a

sheet of paper in the best order. Much of the draft of our book was a rag-bag of

strips and fragments, peppered with staples. It looks untidy, but it works. When

the reassembled text is retyped, it will need reading through again, because there

are often gaps when a text is pulled apart and reassembled in this way. But

overall you will probably be surprised how much more logically it reads after

such close and detailed attention.

Editing for style is a skill which grows with practice. Chapter 7 of this book,

‘Style for Readability’, discusses what to look for. In summary, look out for long,

rambling sentences, pompous words and phrases, and roundabout constructions

which can be made terser. Even experienced writers often write in a roundabout

way in the first draft. When the mind is thinking round an issue, it often makes a

series of false starts. We all know that a clumsily started sentence can usually be

‘saved’ by a series of tortuously phrased afterthoughts. Editing should remove

these unnecessarily long structures, and find more direct expressions. Picking

out active verbs usually makes the rest of the sentence fall into a natural order. Most

writers can find ways of shortening their texts considerably. As an example, our

first draft of part of Chapter 1, as it came off the typewriter, read:

The tradition of verbose writing is a modern one. It has been laughed at

often enough, but how many can honestly say that the style is never used,

deliberately or not, by the technical writers they have read. The point is that

Newton didn’t feel the need to elaborate, decorate and obfuscate his

meaning with inflated style. It was exciting enough in itself. The clear,

simple language of great thinking was enough. Why do so many modern

scientists, engineers and technologists feel the need to wrap up their

meanings?

A fortnight later, we read it through, and revised it:

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***The complete text***

Of course, no one set of writing procedures suits everyone; we do not suggest

that the writing plan we have outlined here is the only way to write. But we do

recommend the principle of the division of labour that the plan offers. Breaking

down the various decisions involved in writing into separate stages reduces panic

by making the job less awesome. It also makes writing a routine. No longer are

moods of inspiration needed, no longer is writing only possible when you are

exceptionally awake and fresh. The various stages can be worked through even

when you are tired, or simply not feeling like concentrated creative thought. All

professional writers learn this early in their careers. You probably *use* writing as

an adjunct to professionalism in other spheres; but learning the divide-andconquer

techniques of the professional writer is still a valuable career asset.