

Writing tips

Here are some writing tips I've learned over the years, including some I learned during a wonderful workshop about writing proposal summaries (best 2 hours of training I've ever had!).

Structure

- The top-level structure of a document is its title, which tells a reader what the document is about.
- Next are section headings. Each tells the reader what part of the document is about.
- Every paragraph should pass the "highlighter test". If you were to highlight one sentence in each paragraph (usually the first sentence) and read only the highlighted sentences, would you get the gist of the document's detail?
- From this it follows that paragraphs should be short, so each makes one main point. A guideline is 100 words (3-4 sentences). Apparently the New Scientist and quality papers like the Guardian have writing that is consistent with that guideline.
- Once you have finished a draft, delete as many words as you can without losing the sense of the points you want to make. This makes your writing more concise and easier to understand.
- Read out loud what you have written. If you stumble at any point then you have identified a place where you need to improve the writing. If your writing is easy to read then that indicates that it flows.

Overcoming writer's block

- Start by writing down the section headings, and deciding the amount of space you will devote to each section.
- How much space will you devote to text and how much to tables & figures?
- If each section is worth a certain number of marks then a good starting point is to make the space proportional to the marks.
- Summarise each section as a set of bullet points. They should have a logical flow, and could provide the highlighter sentences of each paragraph. Change/reorganise the bullets if they don't flow. It is much faster to write bullet points than whole paragraphs of polished text.

Other tips

- Use a grammar checker and a spelling checker. They will help you to correct mistakes that we all make.
- Be 100% consistent with your terminology. Use only one term for a given thing, and never use the same term for different things.
- "The" vs. "a": If you say "the house" then you must previously have referred to the house. Otherwise you should say "a house". This/that/these are similar to "the".
- Speak the reader's language. Will they understand your terminology? If not then consider changing it.
- Every figure should have a caption, and be referenced in the body of a document.
- Figures should be legible, and that includes the text on the figure.