If you are an engineer, scientist, or technician, you already know that writing is critical to your success. If you can write a memo, a letter, or a proposal that makes your point and motivates your audience, you’re a valuable asset to your company. If you can’t, you’re much less valuable.

That’s the way it is now, and the ability to write well is going to become even more important each year as communication technology improves: you will write more often to more people. This book explains a commonsense approach to workplace writing that can help you write faster and better. With a little practice, you will find that the need to write is really an opportunity to showcase your technical skills.

The key to effective writing is learning a system that takes advantage of the way the mind works. Without a system, every writing task becomes an exercise in frustration. You stare at the blank screen for what seems like hours, and when you finally do write something, it isn’t what you want to say. This book describes a simple but effective system for any kind of writing on the job.
Organization of the Book

The book is divided into two parts: techniques and applications.

Part I, on the techniques of workplace writing, is a summary of the best current thinking on how to arrange words and graphics on a page to make it easy for your readers to understand what you have to say. Chapter 1 discusses some of the major reasons people have trouble writing and then suggests ways to become more comfortable as a writer. The most important step is to realize that writing is hard not only for you but for everyone, that it takes much more time than you want to devote to it, and that the results are never perfect. With these assumptions understood, you can stop feeling frustrated and disappointed in yourself and instead put your energies into creating a document that gets the job done.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the writing process. First you analyze your audience and define your purpose; then you put together a plan for the document. After you make sure your boss agrees with your plan, you generate information, organize it, write the draft quickly, and spend as much time as you can revising it. You set it aside for as long as possible, pick it up, and revise it even more. This process—or some variation on it—works regardless of the kind of document you are writing.

Chapter 4 deals with word processing—how to use the computer during the different stages of the writing process. It also addresses spell checkers, thesaurus programs, and style programs. The computer is a great tool, as long as you realize it is only a tool, not the brain behind the writing.

Chapters 5 through 8 concentrate on improving the coherence of your writing—the way it hangs together—and on improving paragraphing, sentence construction, and word choice. Chapter 5 covers formal elements such as titles, headings, lists, introductions, and conclusions. Chapter 6 focuses on techniques of writing better paragraphs: providing an overview in the topic sentence, organizing the body clearly, and using transitional devices. Chapter 7 covers sentence construction, including suggestions on how to make them concise, clear, and powerful. Chapter 8 concentrates on individual words and phrases, focusing on choosing the simple, clear word and avoiding unnecessary jargon, euphemisms, clichés, and sexist language.

Chapters 9 and 10 discuss the visual elements of writing. Chapter 9 explains some basic principles of graphics: knowing when to
use them, determining what kind to create, making sure they are
honest and clear, determining where to put them, and linking them
to the text. Chapter 10 is an overview of page design: the art of
arranging words and visuals on a page so that it is attractive and
easy to understand. The chapter concentrates on white space, col-
umns, and type.

Part II of the book consists of eight chapters of advice on
creating common kinds of workplace documents: letters, memos,
minutes, procedures, manuals, proposals, progress reports, and
completion reports. (I don’t discuss electronic mail, which is a
medium rather than a kind of document, or online documentation,
which is such a complex topic that it requires a full-length book,
such as William Horton’s Designing and Writing Online Documentation
[John Wiley, 1990] .) As you read these discussions, keep in mind
that workplace writing is not a science; there are no specifications
or codified rules on which everyone has agreed. You won’t find a
document that explains, for example, how everyone should write a
proposal; you won’t even find complete agreement on what a pro-
posal is. If you are lucky, your company or a professional organi-
zation in your field has published standards on what they want to
see in a proposal. In most cases, however, this kind of information is
not written down; you have to look around and find good examples
of the kind of writing your readers are looking for and then try to
figure out, from the finished product, how to put it together.

Because there are so many approaches to writing the common
kinds of documents, Part II does not seek to define and exemplify all
of them. This is not a book of models for you to retype, such as 100
Business Letters for Every Occasion. Rather, Part II seeks to explain the
basic strategies behind the different documents. For instance, in
discussing memos, I’m less interested in the details of how the
subject line is displayed in your company than in what a subject line
is supposed to accomplish. In discussing completion reports, I’m
less interested in what your company calls them than in the kinds
of questions you want to answer in writing a report at the end of a
project.

The book concludes with six appendices: a set of writing check-
lists; a handbook that reviews basic grammar, punctuation, and
mechanics; a guide to commonly misused words and phrases; guide-
lines for nonnative speakers of English; guidelines for writing to
nonnative speakers of English; and a bibliography.
How to Use This Book

Unless you’ve taken a good, comprehensive course in technical communication in the 1990s, much of the material in Part I will probably be new to you. Therefore, I recommend that you read all of Part I; it contains advice that you can put to use right away in all your writing.

Part II, on the common kinds of documents, is more of a reference. When you have to write a report and you know it is supposed to include an executive summary, Chapter 15 is the place to turn. Before you write your next letter, spend a few minutes reading Chapter 11. Part II is designed to help you understand the strategies involved in creating different kinds of documents; it will set you on the right track. But remember that workplace writing is ultimately local: the interests and needs of your readers should take precedence over any advice in this or any other book.

Appendix A is a set of checklists that serve as a review of the main points of the book. You should revise them, deleting those items that don’t pertain and adding others that are missing.

Appendix B, the review of grammar, punctuation, and mechanics, is a brief look at the problems that are most common in workplace writing. Although it is true that punctuation and mechanics problems are not the main causes of ineffective workplace writing, they can undermine your credibility and professionalism. If you know that your writing suffers from these superficial problems, Appendix B will go a long way to helping you. Keep in mind, however, that a full-size handbook, such as Diana Hacker’s A Writer’s Reference (St. Martin’s, 1992), is much more comprehensive.

Appendix C, the review of commonly misused words and phrases, is for everyone who cannot remember the difference between “affect” and “effect.” As is the case with punctuation and mechanics, misusing words and phrases is less likely to confuse your readers than to undermine your credibility and professionalism.

Appendix D, guidelines for speakers of English as a second language, discusses some of the inscrutable aspects of the world’s most difficult major language. A few pages won’t make English simple, logical, and consistent, but they might help to some degree. The appendix begins with a reference to an excellent book on the subject.
Appendix E, guidelines for writing to speakers of English as a second language, offers ten tips to help you communicate with people who are not completely fluent in the language. With a little care, we can all reduce the chances that our message will be misunderstood.

Appendix F is a selected bibliography, covering such subjects as general writing, technical writing, proposals, word processing, and graphics.

No book, regardless of how good it is, can turn you into an excellent writer. You have to write and keep writing. If your company has a technical writing or technical publications department, get to know the people there. They have many resources that they would be willing to share with you. And they would also be happy to take a look at a draft, for they know that anything they can do to help you will just make their own jobs that much easier in the future.

For some twenty years I have used the system described in this book in my consulting and university teaching. This system has given thousands of professionals the skills and self-confidence to cut down the time and aggravation that go into writing and to improve dramatically the effectiveness of their finished products. I hope it will work for you, too.

Acknowledgment


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