



When looking for employees, **executives say that good writing is one of the hardest skills to find** in job candidates and yet one of the most important basic abilities. A 1998 OfficeTeam survey of executives with the nation's 1,000 largest companies found that 29% cited good writing as the hardest skill to find. According to the College Board's National Commission on Writing in 2004, two-thirds of salaried workers in large U.S. companies have jobs that require writing, and writing skills training requires \$3.1 billion annually. Writing is considered a "threshold skill" for employee promotion, according to the study, meaning if this isn't one of your skills, you may continue to find yourself at the bottom of the career ladder.

Even with technology advances and the broader use of computers and word processing programs, writing is still a key aptitude. In fact, **the popularity of emails in business communications is one of the major reasons writing skills have become so crucial**, according to some experts. An unclear, garbled email can waste your company time and money.

"One of the most surprising features of the information revolution is that the momentum has turned back to the written word," says Hoyt Hudson, vice president of Information Services at InterAccess, an Internet service provider in Chicago. "Someone who can come up with precise communication has a real advantage in today's environment."<sup>2</sup>

Alan Cunningham, a manager in the computer sciences department at NASA's Marshall Space Center, in Huntsville, Alabama, agrees: "Strong communication skills are vitally needed in today's business climate. You find yourself writing to gain the support of both internal and external customers."

Cunningham thinks good writing is especially important when communicating with customers in many types of documents, including business proposals, status reports, customer correspondence, documentation, technical support and email. Every job description for a new position on his staff, he says, includes the following line: "Required: effective organization and mastery of the English language in written and oral forms."

As we mentioned earlier, good writing is often a key element in assessing a person's ability to advance within the organization. **Good writing can increase a person's power.** This workbook will help you learn the essentials in business writing through exercises and information.

Of course, one class and one workbook will not completely change your writing ability. Enhancing your writing skills is the same as improving any other skill: It takes lots of practice.

# THE WRITING FORMULA

Writing is difficult for many people, no matter what language they speak, because they do not know how to start and then continue with a systematic formula or process. The best process for good writing is using the four primary steps: *prewriting*, *drafting*, *editing* and *postwriting*.

Many people try to edit their document as they write, making the process drawn out and rather frustrating. Many times this leads to a common writing problem: writer's block. You know you're blocked when you look at an empty sheet of paper and can think of nothing to put on it, or sit for minutes trying to think of a better word to use. By using the systematic approach, writer's block is virtually eliminated and your writing time is decreased.



## PREWRITING

Prewriting is one way to avoid writer's block and a good way to assess what you want to communicate. In prewriting, you define your message and consider what information is needed to best communicate your meaning to your audience. An example of defining your message would be: *I want my manager to understand the importance of more computer training.*

### Brainstorm

You then start writing down your thoughts on this subject. By writing down key points about your subject, and questions your audience might have, you start your thought processes moving. **Prewriting is basically your own brainstorming session**, where you let your thoughts guide you without any deterrent.

Some call this method of prewriting "free writing," which is a good way to describe it. You are *freeing* your mind to put down your thoughts without any self-editing to block your way. By brainstorming about the example message above, you might identify such items as

- Who are these employees?
- What is the cost per employee?
- What are the next steps in developing a training program?
- When should this training start?
- Why do they need the training?
- Where should the training be done?

You may have noticed that we've used the basic "W's" in our questions: who, what, when, where and why.

## Remember Your Audience

When using the free writing approach to start your project, the next step is stepping back and looking at your jottings to begin determining what should remain and what can go. Think back to how you defined your message and the information needed to communicate your meaning. Remember who your audience is, and make sure your points are all necessary for them. For example, if you are writing a proposal to your boss, you may include some points that would not be necessary if you were writing a general overview for top management.

### Ask Yourself These Questions:

- How interested or involved in the subject is my reader?
- How knowledgeable is he or she on the subject?
- Does my reader understand the purpose of this document (e.g., to make a decision or be better informed)?
- If my reader has special concerns or strong views about the subject, what are they?
- How does my reader regard me personally and professionally?
- What is my reader's style of doing business?

## Remember Your Goal

Another factor to consider in prewriting is your ultimate *goal* in this writing project. Are you trying to persuade your audience to do something as a result of this document (e.g., a proposal or recommendation report)? Are you trying to inform them of the facts in a situation (e.g., an executive summary in a report on survey findings)? Are you providing your opinion about a particular issue (e.g., an editorial for the newspaper)?

If your goal is to persuade, as in the example used above for additional computer training, your **prewriting should include the arguments for your recommendation** – why this project is important and should happen. If your goal is to inform, you should include the basic facts that have come from your research and analysis. If your goal is to provide an opinion, you should consider your main thoughts that support your views.

## DRAFTING

Many frustrated writers skip over the prewriting stage and try to start their writing process at the drafting stage, putting their thoughts into fully structured sentences that are organized by ideas. This sometimes stops the process altogether because the brain is forced to slow down and think of appropriate words and sentence construction.

## **Begin Organizing Your Document**

To avoid this slowdown, writers should make drafting the second step after prewriting. At the drafting stage, writers can look at the thoughts they have put down in their prewriting, and determine the proper organization, logic and structure of their document.

For example, in the computer training example we've been using, think about what is the most important thing to communicate first. It may be why you think this training is needed. Then, you might want to write down some of the answers to that question. For example,

We need additional computer training because:

- Some of our more senior employees don't understand word processing or other basic software programs.
- Our customers want to communicate electronically, so everyone should be able to use a computer to send emails and attachments.
- We have an excellent computer instructor already on staff so training cost would be minimal.

Some people like to organize their prewriting thoughts into an outline structure and then begin writing sentences from that. Some prefer to write sentences and paragraphs from these initial thoughts.

Each writer can determine which of these methods works best for him or her.

## **Consider Your Document's Purpose and Length**

Keep writing until you feel you have looked at every appropriate thought from your prewriting and expanded on it. At that point, consider your purpose and go back and determine if more information is necessary in certain areas or even if you have written too much in one section. The drafting stage is also where you begin looking at the length of your document to determine if you have too little or too much verbiage to meet your purpose.

## **Don't Get Bugged Down By Grammar**

At this point, you are actually writing your document, but a writer still should avoid getting bogged down in too much grammar and word usage questions at this point because that is covered in-depth in the next stage: editing. Don't stop and consider substitutes for indefinite words such as "thing." Just write it down and move on.

For example, if you are writing an executive summary in a report for a corporation's top management, you want to stick to the basic facts with some expansion to inform or persuade, depending on your goal. If you are writing a handbook or instruction manual, you may need to expand your thoughts further to fully explain them to the reader.

Keep the writing flowing. The best way to proceed in the drafting stage is to begin writing sentences from the thoughts you jotted down in prewriting. Begin expanding on each idea and forming paragraphs. Begin looking at your references and research to help you develop your factual or persuasive assessment for your audience.

### **Other Factors**

If possible, find a comfortable place to do your writing where you will not be distracted by laughing coworkers, phone calls or visitors.

Take breaks, but try to get your first draft done before you quit for the day. Then you will be ready to either write a second draft or proceed into Editing.

## **EDITING**

Once you feel you have written the correct length of document for your audience and purpose, it is time to start editing. Editing is probably the most important part of the writing process because it organizes, condenses, clarifies and polishes your finished product. Without this step, your document could be a rambling, vague piece of ungrammatical garbage. Your carefully researched report or proposal could end up hurting rather than helping your cause.

You are not only editing for grammar at this stage, you are also looking at your organizational structure and your document's format.

### **Organizational Editing**

Organizational editing helps ensure that you have put each idea in its appropriate place so that each paragraph is appropriately supporting your purpose. A simple organization device is what public speakers remember when composing a speech:

- Tell them what you're going to tell them,
- Tell them,
- Tell them what you've told them.

In other words, be sure you have introduced your subject in your first paragraph. Then, be sure you make your points concisely in properly ordered paragraphs. Finally, summarize your key points in a concluding paragraph. At this point, you should emphasize your argument, recommendation or overall purpose for your audience.

### **Format Editing**

You should look at your document's format and layout to be sure your document is reader-

friendly and attractive. If you have too much text with nothing breaking it up, your report, proposal or white paper is harder to read and looks very dull. Put in “white space” with section headings; bullet points; and graphics, such as charts, graphs and tables (if appropriate). Be sure your margins are consistent and your bullet points or numbers are correctly lined up. Be sure your font is easily readable and the right size for most readers (usually 10 to 12 point is fine, but each font is differently sized).

If your organization has a standard format for various documents, you should follow it, of course. However, this doesn’t mean you have no means to create a more attractive document. It still may be possible to put in headings or bullet points to break up your text and make your document more attractive to the reader.

## **Editing for Grammar**

To many writers, this is the most challenging part of the process because they don’t know proper grammar or why certain rules exist. More than just looking for errors in spelling punctuation, subject-verb agreement and sentence structure, this stage also requires looking for unclear and wordy writing.

## **Proofreading**

Proofreading is the step in editing where you check very closely for the following:

- Spelling
- Punctuation
- Sentence structure
- Clarity
- Conciseness
- Fluency

Of course, after you have composed your document using your word processing software, you will want to do a spell-check and grammar-check. Be aware, however, that these programs are computer-driven. They cannot know for sure if you have made a spelling or grammar error in the context in which you are writing.

Therefore, after these initial checks, get your other proofreading tools together, such as a good dictionary and thesaurus. You also may want to have a style guide from your company, or use another style guide such as the UP (United Press) or AP (Associated Press) stylebooks used by journalists. You should also have on hand a good grammar guide.

In addition, it is often a good idea to have someone else read your document before sending it out. Fresh eyes can see things the writer’s eyes will overlook.

Here are some good proofreading techniques:

1. Read at a slower pace and concentrate on the individual letters of words rather than on the meaning of the words.
2. Stay within your “visual span,” the number of letters you can identify with a single glance (for most people, about six letters).
3. As you proofread, place a ruler or index card under each line as you proofread to focus your concentration and vision.
4. Read each paragraph backwards, from the last sentence to the first. This helps to prevent being distracted by the meaning of the words.
5. Read your final draft aloud to yourself or a co-worker. This helps you see errors you may have formerly overlooked.

*A list of commonly used proofreading marks is available at the end of this section. These are still used for some paper documents, but for electronic documents many have started using the “track changes” ability in their word processing software.*

## **Postwriting**

Many writers stop at the editing step, but there is one more important step in the writing process. After you have completed your editing, set your document down for a few hours or overnight, and then check it again for errors.

If someone has given you directions or is overseeing your work, be sure to check with him or her to be sure you have met all the needs and can deliver on the promises made.

This is also a good time to switch your perspective from the writer to the reader. From the reader’s point of view, is the document’s meaning clear?

Other postwriting questions you should ask include:

- Have I met the reader’s requirements or does he or she need more information?
- Am I making promises I cannot meet?
- Should I have someone else read this document to be sure no errors have been made?
- Does anyone need to give me a final okay before I send this out?

## Proofreading Marks

/	the concluding stroke after each insertion and also used to separate two or more marks*	⊙	period
↵	delete; take it out	↵	comma
∩	close up within line ( )	⊙	colon
<u>close up</u>	close up between lines	↵	semicolon
↵	delete and close up	∩	apostrophe
^	insert <sup>here</sup> <i>(something)</i>	∩/∩	quotation marks
#	insert <sup>#</sup> space	(/)	parentheses
<u>sq #</u>	space <sup>^</sup> evenly <sup>^</sup> between <sup>^</sup> words	[/]	brackets
<u>stet</u>	let <sup>it</sup> stand	$\frac{1}{M}$	em-dash (1941 $\frac{1}{M}$ 1945)
<u>tr</u>	transpose	$\frac{1}{N}$	en dash (1941 $\frac{1}{N}$ 1945)
<u>cap</u>	set in <u>capitals</u> (CAPITALS)	=	hyphen
<u>lc</u>	set in <u>LOWERCASE</u> (lowercase)	∨	superscript ( $\pi^2$ )
<u>sm capi</u>	set in <u>small CAPITALS</u> (SMALL CAPITALS)	^	subscript ( $H_2O$ )
<u>ital</u>	set in <u>italic</u> ( <i>italic</i> )	=	align horizontally
<u>bf</u>	set in <u>boldface</u> ( <b>boldface</b> )		align vertically
<u>sp</u>	spell out <u>abbrev</u>	□	□ — move left
¶	Begin new paragraph. →	□	□ — move right
<u>run in</u>	Do not begin new paragraph	}]	center horizontally
<u>break</u>	begin <u>new line</u>	⌋	center vertically
		<u>wf</u>	wrong font
		9	inverted letter
		x	broken letter

## **EXERCISE: USING THE WRITING FORMULA**

Below are the steps of the writing formula discussed in this section. Go through each step [prewriting, drafting, editing and postwriting] to compose a short email recommendation to your boss on one of the following topics (or use one of your own). Please write at least 200 words (about three paragraphs). You can check the word count on your word processing software.

Suggested topics:

- Add another training course (pick your own training subject) to the current courses available.
- Provide onsite healthcare.
- Buy new computer equipment for your department.
- Hold a staff meeting at a regular time each week.

### **PREWRITING**

What is your ultimate goal with this email? Write it down. Brainstorm and write down five questions you need to answer for your recommendation.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

### **DRAFTING**

On another sheet, write your first draft of the email from your notes above.

### **EDITING**

Go over your draft to edit and proofread using proofreading symbols as needed. This also include spell-check and grammar-check (available on your word processing software). Provide a clean draft for postwriting.

### **POSTWRITING**

Go back over the final version and check to be sure you have answered questions the reader might have (how much does it cost?, how much time will it take?, where and when will this happen?, etc.).

Attach your prewriting, drafting and final version. You will receive this back with feedback to help you as we go through the rest of our sections.