



# Don't blame the reader

If writing is eating up your time or if your emails, proposals and reports are not being read then it's critical to sharpen up your writing skills. Here **Clive Lewis**, MD of Illumine Training outlines a three step approach designed to take the stress out of business writing and help readers get the message



## AUTHOR NOTES

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**D**on't read this article! You are too busy. You have a pile of other written documents to get through and what I'm about to say is probably as dull as ditchwater anyway.

Well all right, this isn't true, or not all of it. However, I hope it will start you thinking about how you can capture a reader's attention. You see writing is all about persuasion and the hard truth is that only 10-15% of what people write in their proposals, reports, letters, emails and brochures ever gets read. So how can you make your writing work harder for you? How can you engage people from the first sentence? How can you hold their attention? How can you win them over?

Now you may be thinking that you write perfectly well already or, indeed, that writing is not really a key business competence for you because you are only relaying information. If you believe this then you are almost certainly wrong. Let me give you a few facts, which may surprise you:

- It has been estimated that 90% of all business transactions involve written communications.
- The 2003 E-Mail Rules, Policies and Practices Survey from the American Management Association, Clearswift, and the ePolicy Institute found that the average employee in the US spends about one hour and forty-five minutes a day dealing with email.
- Text communication is also a growing phenomenon with over 2 billion texts being sent every month (The Mobile Data Association June 2004).
- The annual CBI-Perstemp employment trends survey (September 2004) revealed that 33% of firms found that they needed to give school-leavers basic training in literacy and numeracy.

So is writing important? I would say it is essential in business at all levels. And if you want to succeed in your career then you need to find a way to improve the quality and effectiveness of your writing.

### The three-step solution

Talk to most people about their need to improve their written English and you will see a dazed look come over their face. But it isn't that difficult to improve your writing. You just need to know the three basic steps that are absolutely guaranteed to make writing easier for you and for your readers. Let me tell you what these are.

### 1. Planning

It is absolutely no surprise to find that planning is your first step. But how many people plan what they are going to write before putting pen to paper or cursor to keyboard? It is no surprise that professional writers spend more than twice the time in planning compared to non-professional writers.

Now let me be clear about this. Planning is key firstly because it helps the writer to gather all their ideas and information and, secondly, because it helps stimulate creative thinking.

In this context there are a number of powerful techniques, which you can use. Mind Mapping is one and you can find out more about how to use it this planning tool on [www.mind-mapping.com](http://www.mind-mapping.com). Another one is the Cluster technique which, like Mind Mapping, allows you to put down on one page all the various associated thoughts that you have around your subject and enables you to see the relationships between ideas. You can use this technique for both idea generation and prioritising – and as a process it doesn't take long to do – five to ten minutes will enable you to jot down all your ideas and simplify your topic into a clear outline.

Furthermore with both Mind Mapping and the Cluster technique there will always be one critical area of thinking you begin to address – your audience. Maybe you are writing for one person, maybe for thousands – but in the planning process you need to put yourself in their shoes. How much do they know about the subject on which you are writing? How much detail do they need? What style of writing is appropriate? Start answering these questions and you will have a much better chance of composing a piece that is appropriate and engaging.

### 2. The quick draft

Of course once you have built the big picture in the planning process it is far easier to then construct your document. You know where you are starting, you know where you are going and you have some key milestones for your journey. However, now it is time to start – and for all would-be effective business writers that means you have to learn to rough draft your text and build momentum.

When drafting a good piece of advice is to send the

editor part of your mind to lunch. Do not edit as you draft, do not revise as you go along and once you have started don't stop – keep going; if you make an error then leave it. If you can't think of a word or phrase then leave a space. Remember that nothing comes out perfectly the first time so don't aim for perfection with the first draft. Instead aim for a document that contains everything you want to say.

Now some people tell me that when it comes to writing they often find they have a block. They end up staring at the screen or, suddenly, find all sorts of other jobs that need doing first. So what is going on? Well, sometimes people do not know what to say and sometimes they know what to say but don't know how to say it. And if you are one of those who finds that you get stumped then here is a simple tip. Begin anywhere. It doesn't matter where you start with writing as long as it is all included at the end. So if one part of what you are writing becomes troublesome then just go somewhere else.

Oh yes, and one final hint with rough drafting. Keep a pad to hand for quick notes. Every writer gets good ideas when drafting; ideas that don't belong to the sentence or paragraph under construction. Note them as they occur and keep them for later use.

### 3. Editing

Once you have adapted your piece you are almost ready for the most important step of all – editing. And invariably this means cutting down on your text, not adding to it.

Again you have to have the reader in your mind when you are editing. You may think that you have a thousand wonderful things to say, and some unmissable messages to get across, but the effectiveness of your communication is not measured by what you know and say. It is measured by how much your reader takes in and understands. Editors know this and that is why they are ruthless with their red pen! Your task with everything you have written is to develop such key editing skills.

But before you start to edit take a break. Ideally, overnight – or at least a couple of hours – before looking at what you have written. This will allow you to come at it with fresh eyes and decide whether it makes sense, whether it reads well and whether it conveys the right message. Editors are obsessed with a handful of ways in which writing can be made engaging for the reader and here are three examples which can help to ensure that the piece you have written is one that conveys your message most powerfully:

i. Are you managing your readers' attention? If your sentences are too long and/or too complex then find ways to break them down. Shorter sentences will help you to be clear and concise and will ensure that it is easier for your readers to follow what you are saying. Additionally, add variety. If the first sentence in every paragraph you have written starts with the same word e.g. 'I' or 'The' then your readers' attention will start to waver and they may start to skim read. Vary the length of your paragraphs and vary the words you start with. Also see whether you are using any padding. If you find words that are not essential then remove them.

ii. Create movement with more active writing. Most passive sentences contain some form of the verb 'to be'. So if you want to develop a more active style of writing then look out for, and see if you can replace, these words – 'am', 'is', 'was', 'were', 'be', 'being', 'been'. And also check to see if the word 'by' is in there, another word that is commonly used in a passive context. Once you have spotted that you are using the passive voice change it by checking where the verb is and where the 'doer' and 'doee' is in the sentence. If you want to create movement in your writing then put the 'doer' before the verb and the 'doee' after the verb. So 'The director wrote the report' is active while 'The report was written by the director' is passive.

iii. Create more energy by finding the real action. Replacing long nouns with verbs will enliven your writing still further. Here is an example, 'We would appreciate your signature on the contract'. This is terribly slow compared to 'Please sign the contract', which is far more direct. Similarly, 'We'd like your clarification of the matter' can similarly be replaced by the faster 'Please clarify the matter'. So your challenge is to spot problem nouns and generate a simpler, more active voice.

Now there are a number of ways you can test whether your writing is as clear as you want it to be. First try reading it aloud. If it flows and has a logical structure then you are probably on the right lines. If you want to go further than this then try giving it to a friend whose judgement and opinion you value and see what feedback they give you.

Alternatively you can use the well-known fog index to check whether your text has the clarity you require. To calculate your fog index take a passage of about 100 words and divide it by the number of sentences. This will give you an average sentence length (A). Now total the number of words, which have three or more syllables (avoiding proper names, nouns or words with prefixes or suffixes). Call this total B. Add the totals A+B and multiply by a factor of 0.4 and this figure will be your fog index.

The figure you have for your fog index represents the minimum reading age required by your reader in order to make sense of your writing. And just to give you a feel for the fog index of the British press, *The Sun* has a fog index of 6–8, *The Express* and *The Mail* have an index of 10–12, *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* have an index of 14–18 and *The Independent* has an index of 20–24.

Now this article provides you with enough outline information to see what particular writing blocks you might need to address – but that doesn't make you a writer. Training and coaching in order to hone your skills in the planning, drafting and editing stages of writing is essential. So start by becoming more aware of how you currently go about your writing assignments. Develop your critical eye and ask yourself how interesting or impactful your writing is. And then question whether some of the techniques I've outlined here would make a significant difference to your performance. If you come to the conclusion that you want to produce a far higher quality of written work, and do so more quickly than before, then it is time to start developing those latent skills.

