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# The Writing Process



## Focus:

- Writing as a process that involves planning, drafting and revising
- Rhetorical and genre analysis
- Writing in business contexts
- Planning a writing project

The skill of writing is acquired through conscious and persistent effort: unlike our ability to speak, it is not an innate skill. There are several reasons that writing is more complex than speaking. One is that it is separate from any form of physical interaction: writing can take place at a totally different time and place from reading. This leaves the written text more open to misunderstanding than the spoken text. Since they are not likely to be present when their readers read their document, writers must try to perceive their text from the readers' point of view and write in a way that is clear and relevant to their audience. Another reason is that writing is thought-active. The simple fact that you want to write about a topic triggers thought processes that give this topic a particular shape out of a range of alternatives. To paraphrase Flannery O'Connor, we don't know what we think until we read what we write. The changes that take place from thinking to writing explain why many novice writers complain that their final result is not what they initially wanted to express, or that what they mean comes out differently on the written page.

Because of the complexity of written communication, a successful written text does not emerge spontaneously, but requires considerable preparation and revision. Even a brief e-mail requires some revision to ensure it's clear and accurate. And although much business and technical writing follows standard conventions of style and organisation, each task presents a new problem to solve with its own audience and situation. This chapter looks at some major, tested, techniques for creating effective written documents, from concept to delivery copy.

The techniques discussed here are not the only way to write; there are almost as many variations of the writing process as there are writers.

Professional writers of all varieties, business, academic, journalistic and creative, gradually develop their own technique of writing. If it works, then stick with it – if not, consider different techniques.

In fact, writers could be classified into two major categories, *top-down* and *bottom-up* writers. Top-down writers begin by brainstorming an outline of their document, and then filling it in with content. They work better when they see the structure of their text, and like to have a ‘map’ or ‘big picture’ of the whole document before writing the details. Bottom-up writers, on the other hand, prefer to free-write their ideas without attention to structure. They are more data-driven, and end up with many points, facts and examples before they consider how to give form and coherence to their draft.

Regardless of what category of writer you are, effective writing is the result of a process consisting of three interconnected stages: the planning or conceptualising stage, the drafting stage and the revising/editing stage. In contrast to what is commonly believed, it is the first and third stages that require the most time and attention. You will find that by having a clear vision of what you want to accomplish (stage 1), and giving yourself adequate time to rephrase, delete, rearrange and add information to sections (stage 3), you are creating your work. In fact, many professionals who make their living from writing state that planning and revising take about 85 per cent of the time assigned to a task. The drafting stage is just a bridge between careful planning and structuring information. All well-prepared professional documents require this process of writing, although how long each stage takes varies depending on the length and significance of the document, and on whether you are a top-down or bottom-up writer.

## Rhetoric and genre

US President Theodore Roosevelt once said that ‘the most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people’ (Maxwell 2007: 41). Also, research in business communication has repeatedly shown that successful business professionals are those who actively participate in the culture of their organisation, that is, those who fit in the organisational environment – the team players. Understanding that the writing you do as business professionals creates and sustains relationships with managers, peers, stakeholders, clients and the public (or, negatively, breaks these relationships) is the first step in conceptualising business writing as a social activity. The guidelines proposed here are informed by rhetorical and genre theory, which takes into account audience, purpose and context (Swales 1990; Bazerman and Prior 2004; Bhatia 2004; Cockcroft and Cockcroft 2005).

Rhetoric proposes that all texts aim to have a particular effect on their readers or listeners, for example, to persuade, motivate, inform, warn. If this desired effect is not achieved, it most likely means that the writer or speaker did not accurately assess the reader's dispositions or the situation in which the communication took place. It could also mean that the way the information was presented conflicted with, or did not meet, reader expectations. Like film and fiction, writing, too, has different genres. Genre theory proposes that document formats, such as report, article, essay, email, etc., exhibit certain standard features that capture the requirements of particular rhetorical situations, and are therefore appropriate for these situations. For example, a magazine feature article is shorter than a scientific article and therefore cannot contain as much detail as the latter; a report is divided into sections with headings for easy skimming and 'chunking' information into categories, etc. Although genres change over time, and indeed need to be revised to reflect changing circumstances and emerging media, the conventional structure of a type of text is shared knowledge between writers and readers, and forms a recognised and accepted way to exchange information. As we will see in subsequent chapters, genre considerations include such elements as degrees of formality and document length.

Keeping these factors in mind, when planning a piece of writing consider:

- Who is the *audience*? What do they already know about the topic? What do they *not* know? What do they not *want* to know? In what areas are they likely to be specialised (so that you may form analogies between your topic and those areas)? How much detail do they need? How much of the big picture do they need?
- What is the *purpose* of the document? For example, does the document inform? Analyse? Clarify? Persuade? Will it be used as the basis for a decision? How do you want to change or affect the readers through your document?
- What is the most appropriate *genre*? What is the best format in which to present your information related to the situation? Would an email do the job, or do you need to produce a full investigative report?
- What is the most appropriate *medium* for the audience, purpose and genre? Would your message be clearer if transmitted electronically, or in print, or maybe orally on the phone or in person? If you're sending a report to a client, would a PDF attachment to an email be the best way, or should you send a printed copy through the post? Or both?
- What is the most appropriate *style* of writing? Different genres are conventionally written in a particular style; for example, a report is

expected to be written in more formal style than an email, and a newsletter article is expected to have a lighter tone than a contract. How do you want to appear through your writing? Knowledgeable? Considerate? Strict? Friendly? Your style, formed through sentence structure and word choice, will help you to achieve your desired writing persona.

The professional world abounds with examples where making the wrong decision on the above factors led to costly and serious misunderstandings. For instance, a famous case occurred during the *Columbia* Space Shuttle Incident in 2003 (*Columbia Investigation Board Report 2003*; Gurak and Lannon 2007). *Columbia* disintegrated upon re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere, which led to an investigation board being formed to find out what went wrong. Among other matters, such as technical damage done to the shuttle during the launch, the board found several serious communication factors that contributed to the accident.

In one of these, the engineers responsible for evaluating the condition of the shuttle during and after the launch suspected that the wing had been damaged by a piece of foam that was dislodged during the launch, and they presented their suspicions to management during a briefing session. However, they made a tactical error by choosing a PowerPoint presentation to convey their findings. In fact, they put the most important information in one crammed slide. The management, who were expecting serious scientific results to be presented in a technical report, did not place as much significance on the presentation as was needed because, for them, information on PowerPoint slides did not carry enough urgency. In this example, engineers and management did not share the same genre expectations, and so important technical findings were lost in communication fog.

Such considerations make it desirable for organisations to take measures to ensure consistency in the uses of language by all employees. Large organisations have what is known as *house style* to maintain a consistent style among all documents, and to induct employees in the uses of language favoured by the organisation. This usually comes in the form of a manual or guide that describes the company's templates and conventions for using such techniques as abbreviations, spelling, numbers and fonts. When joining a new company find out about the house style. If starting a new company make house style a priority in your communication plan, to support clarity and uniformity in document design.

More on house style is given in the last chapter. More information on genre, medium and style is given in Chapters 2 and 3. The next section looks at audience considerations.

## Audience analysis

Every act of writing takes place in a new context, with a unique time, place or reader. *Audience adaptation* (or *accommodation* as it is sometimes called) refers to the skill of arranging words, organising thoughts, and formatting a document to best achieve your desired effect on the target audience. *Audience dynamics* refers to the relationship that writers form with their readers through their style, and through the amount and structure of information that they provide. The audience dynamics are effective when the readers get a sense of satisfaction that the questions raised in the text were relevant to their interests, and the answers or solutions provided were convincing. In contrast, audience dynamics are ineffective when the readers feel frustrated or offended because the writer's tone is condescending, the answers or solutions provided are simplistic in relation to the complexity of the questions, or the argument is emotive and based on generalisation. To maximise your ability for effective audience dynamics, assess the reader's needs, knowledge and interest by conducting an audience analysis before writing.

In all, for a text to be successful, there must be *writer–reader complicity*. In other words, the readers must feel that the writer is on their side, supporting their interests and respecting their needs. If readers feel that a writer treats them as an example of a general category, rather than as specific individuals, they are more likely to resist accepting the information given.

For an example of bad audience dynamics and lack of writer–reader complicity, consider the following text, which comes from a government information leaflet telling employers about laws governing sexual and racial discrimination. It is tactless because, by grouping all employers into one category, it implies that the readers may be practising gender discrimination. Also, it fails to bring in the main topic (the Equal Opportunity Act) till the very end, when there is actually no space to give any information about it.

Sexual and racial discrimination is practised by various employers, in retail, small business, industry and corporate environments in a number of parts of the country; it is an important community problem and a direct cause of considerable personal distress.

As an employer, as a Human Resources Officer, or as a business owner, it is important for you to know about the Equal Opportunity Act.

Here is a revised version which creates more complicity between the issuing authority and the readers by addressing the readers directly and

showing them that the information given is for their benefit. Also, this version has improved presentation and appearance by including a title and bullet points, and by introducing the main topic earlier.

### **Employers and the Equal Opportunity Act**

You can play an important part in preventing discrimination if you are responsible for employing staff in

- retail
- small business
- industry
- corporations

The Equal Opportunity Act has been legally enforced since it was passed by Parliament in 1975. This Act makes it illegal for anyone to discriminate – to treat people unfairly because of their gender, race, colour, descent, or ethnic origin.

If you know of anyone in your business environment that rejects a suitable candidate for a position because of their gender, or ethnic group tell them about the Equal Opportunity Act. You can also ask the Commissioner for Community Relations for more information.

Marketing executives and consumer researchers, who have a strong interest in understanding market responses, and who, therefore, conduct extensive research in mass perceptions, take into account five factors of audience analysis:

- Education
- Status
- Attitude
- Demographics
- Psychographics

*Education* refers to the readers' knowledge (or lack of knowledge) in the topic that you are writing about. What would be the likely interest of the readers in your topic, and what aspects of your topic are most likely to interest them? Should you begin with the big picture to put the readers into perspective, or go straight to the details that you want to focus on? Are you writing to people of the same educational background as yours (i.e. peers), or to those of different training?

*Status* refers to the writer's degree of authority and/or power relative to the readers. Are you writing to your boss, to a group of peers, or to someone

who is junior to you? Is your reader a client with whom you intend to continue doing business, or the general public that you can only see from a bird's eye view? Are you an expert presenting information to a non-specialist audience, or a novice showing to an authority how much you know about a subject?

*Attitude* refers to the state of mind you expect the readers to be in when they read your document. Will your message find them hostile, neutral or positive? How motivated are they to read your document? Are you proposing revolutionary changes to a situation you think your readers will resist changing? Are you informing them of a breakthrough that will undoubtedly improve the quality of their lifestyle, and that they will be happy to know about? Are you giving them good or bad news?

*Demographic analysis* works on the principle that the population can be grouped, and that each group shows a tendency to think or behave in broadly similar ways. Demographic characteristics include gender, occupation, social class (i.e. income level), age, location/nationality (i.e. international or local audience).

From a person's demographic profile, certain inferences can be made about their degree of knowledge, expectations and aspirations, though they are not always foolproof. For example, in most Western societies a middle-class white woman is probably educated to upper secondary school or tertiary level but not necessarily. Also, teenagers are not likely to be classical music fans, but, again, this may not be so. Demographic research is based on the lowest common denominator of prevailing social trends, and, therefore, operates mostly on stereotype.

*Psychographics* refers to the lifestyle, values, leisure activities and social self-image that the readers are likely to have. Marketing research shows that people react favourably towards products and services that they see as representative of themselves. Similarly, readers will respond differently to your message according to their values. What are their interests, opinions and hobbies? In the rapidly changing and diversifying contemporary world, interests and values are less and less tied to demographic issues. For example, when computer games first started to develop, they were associated with a target market of young males in the 15–25 age group. As this form of entertainment evolved, the target market changed, and there are now computer games that attract females, older males, and other demographic groups. An analysis of the computer game market, therefore,

is more likely to benefit from a psychographic examination that would see the computer game market as a special interest group, rather than a demographic.

Demographic and psychographic analyses are especially relevant in journalistic, marketing and public relations writing where you address a wider public.

In addition to these categories, consider whether you have only *primary* readers or also *secondary* and *immediate* readers. In many cases, the person who will first read the document is not the primary audience. It could be a manager or editor, an intermediary between the writer and the primary audience – this is the immediate audience. The immediate reader often acts as a form of filter or quality-control agent of the information before it reaches the primary reader. Additionally, you could have a secondary audience of readers who are likely to read the document even if they are not the target group.

Consider an example. If you submit an article for publication to a specialist magazine, you are writing for a public that is interested in the topic of your article; they are your primary audience. However, before the article reaches this audience, it will be read by the magazine's editor, who will make the final decision about whether to publish the article or not. The editor is, then, the immediate audience (and maybe the only audience, if s/he rejects the article!). If published, the article may also be read by readers who are not primarily interested in the topic: they could be journalism students, for example, studying the article as an example of writing. They would be the secondary audience.

Matters get complicated when a document has different levels of audience, primary, immediate and secondary, who have different interests and/or subject-knowledge. Such cases make it difficult to imagine whom you are writing to. A solution to this problem is to include a section that gives background and definitions of terminology for novices, or, in reports, to include an appendix with more technical details for experts. This way you would be distributing information in a clearly marked and accessible way to the different groups of readers. Returning to the example of the article to the editor, you could include a letter with your article explaining to the editor your goals in writing the article, and justifying your content and stylistic choices (indeed article submissions are generally accompanied by a proposal). This way you address the editor's concerns, and cater for your primary audience's anticipated questions.

As a final note to audience analysis, remember to include yourself in the analysis, since you are an interlocutor in the communicative exchange.

Analyse your role: as a professional you are always performing a role that is more or less detached from your personal concerns. Also, as part of your professional position you will be asked to play different roles for different situations. For example, if you are the CEO of a company you would have top management responsibilities, such as making executive decisions on major financial initiatives and making long-term plans on new product development. However, when addressing shareholders in situations such as public relations speeches, conferences and product exhibitions, you assume the sub-role of equal, sharing the same values and working towards the same interests. The language you use should reflect this equality, or your audience will be alienated and discouraged.

## Writing in business

Writing in business contexts is pervasive. In fact, most tasks in the workplace are accompanied by some form of writing. Even face-to-face interactions, such as meetings, are preceded and followed by such documents as agendas and minutes. Business documents can be *internal*, *external* or both. Internal documents are circulated within the organisation, and include such genres as memoranda (memos), in-house templates and style guides. External documents are directed at clients, other companies, the media and the public, and include such genres as sales letters and disclosure statements. Many genres, such as certain kinds of reports and email, can be both internal and external. Also, some genres are associated with specific professions while others are general. For instance, most business people, no matter what their actual job, write proposals to request funding or approval for a project, while public relations officers write annual reports and press releases, and human resources officers write employment contracts and job descriptions.

Two terms are important when considering business writing: *project* and *brief*. Tasks in management most often take the form of projects. A project at management level brings together specialists from different fields in order to accomplish an aim, which could include developing a new product, creating an advertising campaign, solving a problem, or evaluating the company's strategic plan. Most of the work of managers takes place within the scope of defined projects. In all cases, a project takes place within specified time parameters (deadlines are important in business) and a budget framework. It also addresses particular questions or issues and has specific goals and objectives to achieve (more on project management in Chapter 9). All this information goes to project members through a *brief*.

Basically, a brief (also known as *terms of reference* in longer projects) is an instruction to perform a task. If it's internal, it may be a short and direct command: 'Investigate the ways in which the company could use cloud computing'. This task would then become your project, and you would need to decide how best to approach it. A brief could also involve detailed specifications spread over several pages. The latter is often the case in briefs to conduct lengthy investigations after a crisis. Problem-solving reports are based on a brief provided by the client or manager, which indicates what is required and how the commissioned specialists should structure their report. Similarly, advertising companies that organise competitions on campaign skills issue a brief which candidates must address to win funding and/or a position in the company.

However, a brief is not only a formal document that presents issues to be addressed in a project. It also sets the stage on which project members will perform. This is because writing itself is not, as is often assumed, a purely mental activity. Rather, it involves the whole sensory framework: think of the physical arousal produced by an action novel or a sexy story: words can cause perspiration, a racing heartbeat, laughter and tears. In fact, it could be said that understanding a text means having the sensation of being where the action takes place. This line of reasoning is informed by the narrative approach to business communication, which sees companies as being organised as stories. The narrative approach recognises that narrative, or storytelling, is a fundamental part of our cognitive framework and manifests in many human endeavours and creations. Narrative exists not only in the stories we tell or write, but also in our perception of the world (Taylor 1993; Taylor and Van Every 2000).

Adapting this approach for professional writing, we can see the brief as giving the information for the story of the project. It contains, explicitly or implicitly, information on stakeholders, issues, problems, strengths and limitations of a business situation. Therefore, a useful way to analyse a brief and establish a plan of action for a project is to read it in terms of three categories:

*Scene*: this includes big-picture matters, such as the scope and framework of the project, the audience(s) and its relation to you as project member, the stakeholders who may not be the audience of your writing but are involved in some way in the project, and the event or context that triggered the project. Generally, the scene involves the level of power and perspective your project involves. If your project is part of a top management strategy, it will have a larger scope and a more long-term planning orientation, involving more issues and anticipating changes and developments. If it is

part of a middle management strategy, it will involve more immediate concerns and specific issues. A top management perspective requires more research and analysis and tends to produce more complicated and lengthier documents than a middle management perspective, which looks at issues concerned with a specific product or service.

*Content:* This includes the issues that you need to cover, or questions that you must answer. The content is determined to a significant extent by the raw materials, sources and limitations that you are given to handle the project, such as funding, deadlines, access to resources and equipment. For example, if you have one day to produce a one-page report, obviously what you write will not be as detailed or analytical as when you have two years and unlimited resources to investigate and solve a problem. Historical aspects are also part of the content. For example, if you are investigating the advantages of cloud computing (to continue the example begun above), in addition to analysing cloud computing itself, you would need to look at the use of computers and networking in your company and in your industry as a whole.

*Treatment:* This includes the tasks into which the project should be divided in order to be completed successfully. It is the plan of action and the steps to be taken. The treatment includes physical and interactive actions, such as organising meetings and conducting interviews and focus groups, and the type of documents that you decide to produce for a situation. For example, a simple email message may be sufficient in some situations. In other cases, you may need to follow-up your email message with a formal letter or maybe a memo, while a more serious situation would require the submission of a proposal leading to a full report. The treatment also includes the ways in which to present information according to audience needs. For example, if you decide that a PowerPoint presentation is enough to inform an audience of your progress on a project, what kinds of data will you use in the presentation? Would a verbal description suffice? Should you use tables, charts and graphs? Should you provide a full financial analysis of the situation?

The problems that can arise when the scene, content and treatment of a project are not properly interpreted can clearly be seen in disaster situations. The NASA space programme provides another example of this, in the famous and well-documented example of the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster in January 1986. It is now widely recognised that the explosion of the shuttle was largely due to misunderstandings that

occurred in the exchange of written information between NASA officials before the launch. Although some officials had detected a functioning error in the shuttle and knew what had to be done to fix it, they did not communicate their finding in an appropriate way to the responsible parties (Herndl, Fennell and Miller 1991).

A brief can also productively be improvised to assist in the writing process even in cases when it is not handed out by others. For instance, if you find your progress in a project is hindered by some uncertain factor, or if you want to achieve an aim but have no idea how to go about it, you should find that conceptualising and writing down your situation in the form of a brief (i.e. a set of instructions or issue statement to yourself) may prove very productive.

A final point about professional projects: recording and detailing your projects is vital in corporate contexts, where mobility is high and staff are transferred or change position often. The person replacing you should be able to continue your work without interruption. This is known in IT contexts as working in 'drop dead' mode, which means that if a team member or manager were to drop dead, s/he should leave adequate documentation and specifications on their work so that projects are not disrupted because they were wholly dependent on their initiator's habits and methods. Keeping notes on a project is, therefore, essential. The 'Document Planning Template', based on the tripartite model described above, can be used or adapted to help you organise writing tasks in a project.

## **Document Planning Template**

### **Scene**

- 1** Scenario (situation that triggered the task)
- 2** Purpose (s) of document
- 3** Target date for delivery
- 4** Audience analysis

**Content**

1 Main message to convey

2 Key Issues

a) \_\_\_\_\_

b) \_\_\_\_\_

c) \_\_\_\_\_

d) \_\_\_\_\_

**Treatment**

1 Genre

2 Supplementary Documents

a) \_\_\_\_\_

b) \_\_\_\_\_

c) \_\_\_\_\_

As an opportunity to reflect on these guidelines, consider what can go wrong in communication. One area that is notorious for miscommunication is the writing of technical instructions or user manuals. In many cases, these instructions are at best obscure, at worst dangerously misleading. Look at Table 1 for some real-life instructions from hell, and think about how each reflects unsolved problems at the planning stage. What should the writers do to improve these?

**Table 1: Nightmare instructions**

*From a technical manual:*

Since the user interface for analyzer calibration refers to calibration as ‘calibration’, this chapter will refer to the process of calibration as calibration.

*From a manual for a database package:*

An action is to be taken on the third non-consecutive day that an event occurs.

*From a technical manual for the British military concerning the storage of nuclear weapons:*

It is necessary for technical reasons that these warheads should be stored with the top at the bottom and the bottom at the top. In order that there may be no doubt as to which is the top and which is the bottom, for storage purposes it will be seen that the bottom of each warhead has been labelled with the word ‘TOP.’ (Cited in a book on computer science published by the Computer Science Department of the University of Virginia – [www.cs.virginia.edu/cs/50/book/ch-programming.pdf](http://www.cs.virginia.edu/cs/50/book/ch-programming.pdf) ).

*From a software user manual:*

When you first start the application, the options bar appears on the top left of your screen, and is where option settings are set for the options used with the currently selected tool.

**WARNING:** The options bar may not be located on the top left of your screen.

## Generating content

Generating content is an analytical practice. This is where researching and thinking come in. Depending on the audience and purpose, different types of research would be relevant. For example, you may decide that interviewing would supply you with essential facts; or you may decide that doing a historical research on a topic would be more suitable; or perhaps a combination of methods would help. Collecting facts, however, is not sufficient. You need to think about the significance of these facts and to interpret them. This is where your skills of *analysing* ideas (tracing their constituent elements), and *synthesising* them (evaluating their significance in a given context) come in.

The process of generating ideas tests your capacity for critical and creative thinking: your ability to imagine all possible aspects or factors of a problem. Analytical thinkers do not simply arrive at the most obvious solution to a question; they test out a range of possible answers and keep

an open mind. As happens with chaos theory, sometimes information that initially seemed irrelevant proves to be the key. To be able to trace analogies between seemingly disparate topics and to suggest innovative solutions are skills highly sought in professional and corporate environments. In fact, at the cutting edge of many industries and business endeavours are individuals who are not only highly motivated and organised, but also creative and versatile in their thinking.

The following are some ways to generate ideas. Try them and see which combination suits you.

### **Brainstorming**

*Brainstorming* is a creative technique pioneered by Alex Osborn in the 1950s (Osborn 1963), and has since been very productive in generating new concepts in business contexts. Brainstorming lets you list all the ideas that come to your mind randomly about a particular topic. Brainstorm by writing single words, phrases or full sentences – whatever comes to mind. Many writers find that brainstorming in groups is particularly productive. In fact, brainstorming sessions are now routine practice in many corporations, used to solve problems and to design new products. For example, IBM holds such sessions regularly both within one department and across departments and sections. Also, many popular products were initially conceived during brainstorming sessions: for instance, the popular site Twitter was conceived as a Short Message Service(SMS)-based social networking site by Jack Dorsey, during a day-long brainstorming session.

### **Mind mapping**

*Mind mapping* was devised by Tony Buzan and is similar to brainstorming but more visual and less linear. Mind maps are built up in a four-stage process:

- Start with a word or image central to your topic
- Place it in the middle of a big sheet of paper and draw a line radiating from it to a major subdivision of the topic
- Circle that subdivision, and draw a line radiating out from it to a more specific subdivision
- Continue the process until you run out of ideas

Mind-mapping is especially useful to those who find it easier to assimilate and understand schematic information than linear or sentence-based reasoning. See Figure 1 for an example of a mind map.

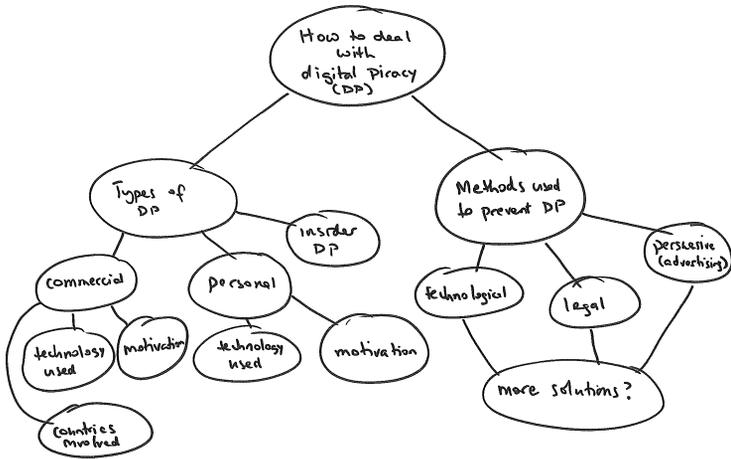


Figure 1 Mind Map

**Asking journalist questions**

*Journalists' questions* begin with what is known as the five Ws and one H interrogatives:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- Why?
- When?
- How?

You can approach your task by listing as many journalists' questions about your topic as you can. Questioning encourages you to look at a topic from many different perspectives, and may help you to narrow the issue that you are investigating. Journalists' questions are especially useful when your task involves much factual information, because they actually force you to answer them by providing specifics rather than open-ended or ambiguous statements. News reporters, who need to convey facts as quickly and objectively as possible, use these questions to craft their news stories.

**Bouncing ideas**

*Bouncing ideas* means talking about your project to someone. The aim here is to listen to yourself talk about your task, so it is not important if your interlocutor is versed in your topic or not. In fact, some writers find that

talking about their topic to someone who is a total outsider helps them to clarify issues.

If you are having trouble solving a particular problem, talk about why you are having trouble. Variations on this method include talking to yourself or talking into a recording device, which has the advantage of capturing your thoughts exactly. Some people are most productive in generating and developing ideas when they can move around and create kinetic energy.

### Writing scientific categories

If your topic involves interpreting a scientific development or process to a non-specialist audience, simplify and analyse the topic in your own mind by brainstorming as many statements as possible under these categories:

*Existence:* How can the existence of  $X$  be shown?

*Quantity:* How large/small is  $X$ /How fast?

*Comparison:* Is  $X$  greater/less than  $Y$ ? In what ways is  $X$  different from  $Y$ ?

*Correlation:* Does the speed of  $X$  vary with its weight?

*Causality:* If  $X$  occurs, will  $Y$  also occur? How do we know?

### Outlining

When *outlining* you first come up with section topics, then a summary of the document, and then gradually expand your ideas to create the final document. After some brainstorming, extract the key themes that you have identified and give them headings. Under each heading, brainstorm some more points that are related to the heading's theme. Having 'filled' the headings, you will have chunks of information on each theme, which make up a summary of your final document. You can then decide what sequence would be most appropriate, and re-order your section headings in that sequence. Outlining is effective for top-down writers, those who begin with a big picture plan of the whole document, and then build up the details as they go. When writing a report, the outline acts as a first draft that can be submitted to a manager or client to show the progress of a project.

### Storyboarding

This is a spatial type of outlining used in film and multimedia projects. Small screens are drawn on a page depicting the main visual elements of major scenes in a project. Under each screen is some script describing the main action and indicating any areas that need to be developed for the particular scene. In the case of writing, the screen can be replaced with a descriptive heading. Spatial experimentation can help you find a logical

order in which to present your ideas; in other words, you can re-shuffle the screens till you find the most appropriate sequence. For both outlining and storyboarding, do not delete documents or files until the project is finished, because you may find that information you thought was redundant becomes relevant again at a later stage.

Figure 2 is a storyboard outline of the sections of a report on the causes and consequences of DVD piracy. The outline distributes section headings without, at this stage, considering the final sequence.

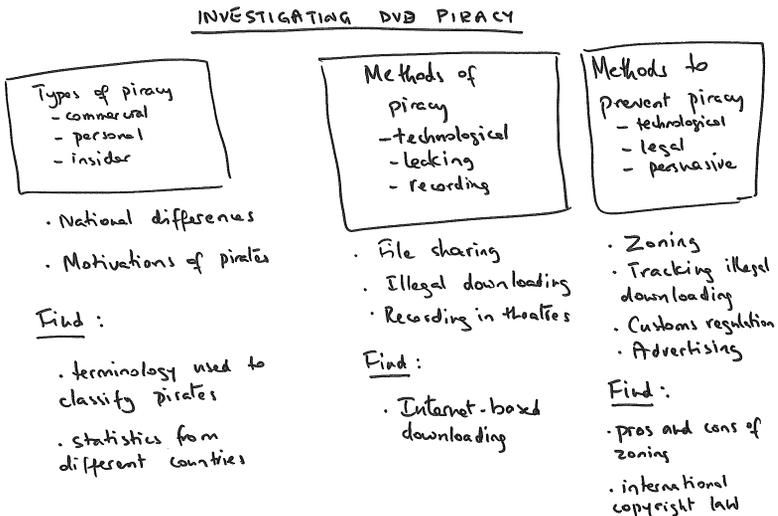


Figure 2 Storyboard

## Drafting

When you brainstorm and use the other techniques for generating content described above, you are basically *drafting*. The drafting stage proper comes when you feel you have gathered enough information and have a clear idea where you are heading, so it is now time to expand confidently. This is when you put to practice the ideas you generated in the previous stage and see how they work in expanded form. When drafting, it helps to be receptive to influences that can provide direction and inspiration. Keep your topic in the back of your mind in your everyday activities; read, watch, listen critically, and seize all that is productive for your purposes. Also, be open to serendipity – inspiration through sudden, previously unrecognised

connections. Many great scientific and technical discoveries were made accidentally, by sudden awareness of previously unseen analogies.

If you get stuck when drafting, do not attempt to complete the draft in one go. Instead, let it incubate by putting it on the 'back burner' of your mind and coming back to it later. The time lapse between giving up on a draft and coming back to it could be a few minutes, hours, overnight, or more – depending on project deadlines, of course! In the meantime, you can do something that, even though it may seem irrelevant, allows your thoughts to gestate. In fact, in professional contexts more often than not you work on many projects simultaneously, so time management, and letting go of one project to move to another become significant skills.

Table 2 gives a definition of major conceptual actions that you perform when drafting a document. These are common to both academic and professional situations.

**Table 2: Writing actions**

Account for	Give reasons; explain why something has occurred.
Analyse	Take apart an idea, concept or statement in order to evaluate it. This type of answer should be methodical and logically organised.
Argue	Systematically support or reject a viewpoint by offering justification and evidence for your position while acknowledging the opposite point of view.
Assess	Judge the worth or value of something critically.
Comment on	Discuss, explain, and give your opinion on the ideas presented.
Compare	Set items side by side, show their similarities and differences, and provide a balanced description.
Criticise (or critique)	Point out strengths and weaknesses of the subject; support your judgment with evidence.
Define	Explain the precise meaning of a concept. A definition answer often follows the DEMF model: Definition, Examples, Main Theorist(s) and Further Information.
Discuss	Explain an item or concept, and then give details about it with supportive material, examples, points for and against and explanations for the points you put forward.
Evaluate	Discuss the material, and reach a conclusion either for or against the concept being discussed and evaluated.
Examine	Analyse the topic, give pros (points for) and cons (points against) or offer a critical judgment about it.
Explain	Offer a detailed and exact explanation of an idea, principle or set of reasons for a situation or an attitude.

Generate	Propose new ideas or new interpretations of available subjects.
Hypothesise	Propose a statement or set of statements that can be used as the basis for testing conclusions.
Illustrate	Provide examples to demonstrate, explain, clarify or prove the subject of the question.
Integrate	In a logically related way, draw together two or more subjects not previously connected.
Interpret	Explain the meaning of something, make it clear and explicit and evaluate it in terms of your own knowledge.
Justify	Give reasons supporting a particular position on the subject. This could be a positive or a negative position.
List	Present issues or subjects in an itemised series. In many cases, listing can be done in point form.
Outline	Give an organised ordering of information stating the main points or idea and omitting details.
Review	Examine, analyse and comment briefly on the main points of an issue.

## Overcoming writer's block

If you find that it is difficult to generate ideas about a specific topic, leading to annoying and costly delay, try one or a combination of these 'unblocking' techniques.

*Freewriting* offers one method of clearing and opening your mind. You can freewrite by writing non-stop, on any topic, for a specific length of time. Do not stop to edit or evaluate what you are writing, and, if you cannot think of anything, keep repeating your last word or phrase until you get going again. The point of freewriting is to unblock your thought processes, and put you in the mood to express ideas in writing. The topic or relevance of what you are writing is, at this stage, put aside. Many writers find that freewriting allows them to approach their task in an uninhibited way.

*Writing to the resistance* means writing about why you are having trouble tackling a task, or why you are being frustrated in your investigations. This process may help you break through a puzzle, or identify more clearly what it is about the forms of evidence you are dealing with that makes them difficult. Writing to the resistance works especially in cases when you feel so

perplexed or overwhelmed by a topic that you find it difficult to write about it in a systematically logical way. It may help you to trace a rational pattern in chaotic thinking.

*Responding and mirroring* should help you get in the mood for writing, by engaging with other texts. Read a text in the genre in which you are writing (for example, if you are writing a report, choose a report, if a magazine article, choose a magazine article), and write an informal critique of it: if you could ask the writer questions about it, what would you ask? What do you think could have been done better in the document? Rewrite a section to improve it. What is particularly effective in the document, and why? If the document asks a question, answer it. By responding this way to the text, you are building motivation and direction to work on yours.

The term for this technique – ‘mirroring’ – comes from the world of acting. Trainee actors learn to perform by reflecting in their behaviour what they observe in a partner – responding to a smile with a smile, to a frown with a frown, etc. This is based on the idea that any form of action is also, by extension, a form of communication, that is, it is meaningful in relation to a context and a set of participants – action is reaction. Clearly, then, this is relevant to writing too, and can fruitfully be exploited as a ‘warm-up’ or ‘unblocking’ technique.

*‘Blind’ writing* is a solution for compulsive editors. If you feel critical about every word you produce and constantly delete and rewrite the same sentence, it may be better not to see what you write. Try typing with a dark screen to help you achieve momentum and mass before crafting your output.

## Tips for successful writers

As a conclusion to this chapter, here are some inspirational guidelines for effective writing. These are based on discussions with people from different countries, who make their living from writing of all kinds, professional, creative and academic. Therefore, these tips are international and based on practical, life experience.

- 1 *Be observant.* All kinds of writing emerge from experience, so the more experience you get in your chosen field the better a writer you will become. Also, being a good writer means being good at dealing with

people. Writing always has readers, and the more you understand people's behaviour and reactions the better a writer you will be.

Remember that the writing process begins before you start writing, so keep an eye out for anything that you could use in your writing later.

- 2 *Record and organise different types of material.* Professional writers keep a record of ideas, objects or events that catch their eye, even if these may not seem relevant to what they are writing at the moment. Writers carry a notebook and pen, or their digital equivalents, everywhere, and many also carry a recorder to record their thoughts and observations immediately as they come. This way you are building a pool of resources that some day will find their way into your writing.
- 3 *Do not wait for inspiration.* Writing creates itself – rather like eating is said to arouse the appetite. Most professional writers write on a schedule to meet publishing deadlines, whether they initially feel like it or not. So start writing before you have thought out completely what you want to say. It doesn't matter if you start by writing nonsense, repetitions, fragments or mind maps. You will discover what you want to write by writing and not just by thinking. Your document will eventually write itself.
- 4 *Revise as you write.* Most professional writers do at least two, and sometimes many more, drafts of anything they write. The first version should never be the last version. To be a successful writer, you should see yourself both as innovator (coming up with new ideas and new connections between ideas) and editor (rearranging and cutting out parts of your text). Regarding professional writing, keep in mind that many documents are collaborative and those editing a document may not be the same as those who wrote it.
- 5 *Learn grammatical rules and genre conventions.* Successful writers know standard English very well. Although writing is based to a large extent on skill, imagination and knowledge, it is still a technical medium dependent on grammatical rules. Even if you want to break those rules, as many writers in fact do, you first need to know what they are. Similarly, find out what the standard conventions for different genres in your field of writing are. If working in a business context, find out about your company's house style. These rules and conventions are the tools of the trade.
- 6 *Get feedback.* In contrast to what some people wrongly believe, writing is not a solitary activity. A written text is meant to be read, so discuss your projects with friends and colleagues, and distribute your drafts for comments when possible and appropriate. Other people may be able to give you valuable insights on your work that you would have missed if you worked in isolation.

## Activities

- 1 Analyse a media text (for example, an advertisement, a magazine feature article, etc.) in terms of its target audience.
- 2 Interpret the following briefs using the scene–content–treatment model outlined in this chapter. Plan your course of action and decide what kind of information you would need to gather to write each report.
  - a You are a travel industry expert.

A major airline, LibAir, has commissioned you to assess its competitive position in the travel industry. The airline executives want you to investigate recent developments in aircraft construction, security measures and client services, and to evaluate their airline’s advantages and disadvantages in relation to those of competitors. Write a report that identifies pertinent issues and recommends a practical course of action for the airline to follow in order to remain competitive in the current travel market.
  - b You are a security expert.

The Privacy Commissioner has asked you to investigate and write a report on contemporary issues concerning privacy. With developments in surveillance technology, the spread of Internet-published information and digitally stored personal information, there is serious concern that individual rights to privacy are being eroded. The increasing presence of computer hackers and state owned satellite systems mean that individual privacy is being attacked from both private and public sectors. The Commissioner wants you to investigate the extent to which this fear is justified, to evaluate possible consequences and to suggest possible solutions. Write a report that identifies and analyses pertinent issues and puts forward a clear set of recommendations for action.
  - c You are the Human Resources Manager at Law Limited, a leading national law firm.

Law Limited has been having difficulties retaining its junior and intermediate-level lawyers. This is an industry wide problem, with law firms generally losing more than half of their junior lawyers before they reach an intermediate level (3–4 years experience). The Chief Executive of Law Limited has asked you to prepare a report investigating the problem both within the company and inter-company. Write a report that identifies pertinent issues while taking into account the interests of the company as well as the views of the junior lawyers. Outline a couple of alternative solutions, evaluate them and propose the best solution justifying your recommendation.

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