Hurley Write, INC.

10 Quick Tips to Improve your Writing

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Plan!

Many writers don't take much time to plan; in fact, many simply begin writing, believing that their first draft will become their final draft with just a little "cleaning up" and reorganization.

For writing tasks, up to 80 percent of your time should be spent planning, which should result in less time spent writing and revising. The result is less wasted time and clearer, more targeted documents.

Try this: Use freewriting, brainstorming, outlining, or a combination before you begin the actual drafting process.

Figure out, in advance, your "walk-away" message.

Effective writers know what they want to accomplish with the document, which we call the take-home, or walk-away, message. If you don't know, and haven't taken the time to write it down, chances are good that your reader may come to a conclusion you didn't intend; consequently, you'll be less likely to achieve your goal.

Knowing why you write can also help shape the finished product. Take time before you start writing to establish why you're writing this document at this time; who will read it; and what you want them to learn, consider, or do as a result of reading.

Try this: Write an outcome statement that clearly indicates what action you want your readers to take or the objectives of the document.

Get to know your readers.

You know what *you* want to get out of the process, but what about your reader(s)? What do they hope your document will provide, and can you deliver that? What do they not care about? What do they already know, and what do they want to discover?

Getting to know your readers involves more than simply saying, "My boss Joe is my reader." Some additional questions you need to ask are:

- "Will Joe read the document in its entirety or will he skim?"

- "What kind of information is Joe looking for?"
- "How much knowledge does Joe have about this subject?"
- "Who else may read the document and what are they looking for?"
- "Is Joe biased or skeptical or is he on-board with what I'm proposing?"

Try this: Develop a list of questions or other checklist to figure out what you need to know about your reader.

Figure out how much information your reader needs.

Not all readers need all the details. It is possible to stuff a document too full of information, if that information is irrelevant to readers. Even if you feel the need to include all the information in your document for some readers, you can use writing and design strategies that emphasize the main topics and de-emphasize the details for those readers who don't want to get bogged down in the minutiae.

Try this: Use a purpose rubric or checklist to figure out what information your reader needs and why (and what they *don't* need).

Understand reader expectations for organization and create an appropriate organizational strategy.

In other words, in addition to understanding the kind of information your reader is looking for and needs, you need to understand where that reader expects to find that information. How does she expect the document to be organized? General to specific? Specific to general? Chronologically? According to some standard template (e.g., your company's report format or proposal format)?

A document can be organized in a variety of ways, and the organizational strategy you use should be based on your readers' expectations and the type of information you're presenting. Ultimately, how information is presented matters. Lead your reader through a logical structure and help them connect ideas to remember the material.

Try this: Think about organization as a strategy to ensure that your reader will reach the conclusion you desire.

Understand how your reader expects the information to be conveyed in both sentences and paragraphs.

Writers have many choices when structuring sentences and paragraphs, which is a good thing! Unfortunately, many writers mistakenly construct their sentences using the "keep it short" strategy, when readability studies clearly indicate that short sentences aren't always more effective than longer ones. Likewise, using nothing but short paragraphs can make your writing seem juvenile and your ideas simplistic.

Try this: Use a variety of sentence and paragraph lengths and put the most important information in the shortest sentences to emphasize and de-emphasize appropriately and keep reader interest.

Understand the terms and words your reader expects and understands.

Too many writers use the most pompous words they can, thinking (subconsciously perhaps) that these words make them sound smart. The opposite may be true: readers want to read your document easily and move on; if they're pausing to figure out what a word means, they may lose interest; what's worse, is that your readers may believe you're simply thoughtless or careless or showing off. Generally, if you can use one word rather than two or more, do; and, if you can use a one- or two-syllable word rather than a many-syllable word, do ("use" is better than "utilize," for instance, and "end" is better than "terminate").

Try this: Use the Fogg Index or any one of the many other readability indices to determine how much education your reader would theoretically need to be able to read and understand your document.

Anticipate reader questions.

Your readers may not believe the same things about the topic that you do. For instance, they may have biases (about the subject, about your company, even about you) that you need to consider. They may not understand the information you've provided in the document or even agree with it.

Try this: Read your document from the perspective of your readers and/or ask someone who is less familiar with the subject to read and give feedback on your document.

Know what to emphasize.

Effective writing is more than just putting words on a page; it involves thinking carefully about what you wish to emphasize and why. Readability studies show that readers pay closest attention to what comes first and last in a sentence (and first and last in a paragraph), for example. Knowing this can help you fashion sentences and paragraphs that emphasize the appropriate information.

Try this: Put the most important words first and last in a sentence and avoid sentence starters such as "It is important to note," which simply delay important information. Keep in mind the importance of the first and last sentences in a paragraph.

Delete words that add no value.

If a word or words can be deleted, and the remaining sentence retains its meaning, those words weren't necessary. Superfluous words do nothing but cloud the message. Some obvious ones are "in order to" rather than "to" and "due to the fact that" rather than "because" or "since." Likewise, you can almost always eliminate intensifiers ("very," "extremely," "really") and de-intensifiers ("rather," "somewhat") without loss of meaning. (An "extremely important meeting" is really no more important than an "important meeting.")

Try this: Use a "slash and burn" technique to eliminate all words that add no value.