

**Tools for Everyday Writers**

— *The* —  
WRITING  
*Process*

*A Step-by-Step Approach  
for Everyday Writers*

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## — FOREWORD —

*Writing isn't just finding words to express thoughts. It's also organizing thoughts so they can be put into words.*

Some people say that writing is a personal, individual act and can't be taught. It's true that you don't ( and won't) write exactly the way anyone else does. But it's also true that almost all good writers use some sort of step-by-step process they've developed and adapted to their own needs.

The goal of this book is to describe one proven way to break your writing tasks into a series of logical steps that will help you get from idea (or assignment) to finished product. Once you've learned the process, you may find that you can sometimes skip a step, or change the order. But you'll probably keep coming back to the process, and choosing the steps that fit your specific project.

Writing is hard work. We can't promise that you'll write effortlessly using this process, but you'll write with less *wasted* effort. It works for us, it works for our students, and we think it will work for you.

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## — WHAT IS — “GOOD WRITING”

Good writing is like lots of other intangibles, like beauty or art — we can't define it, but we think we know it when we see it.

Even if we can't come up with a precise definition, we can identify some of the essential elements of good writing.

### **The Three C's**

Good writing is clear, it is concise, it is correct.

This doesn't mean that our writing will be great if it has all three of these qualities. It does mean that it *cannot* be great, or even good, if it does not have them all. So let's take a look at each.

### **It's Clear**

What is clear writing? A good working definition is that it's writing that your intended reader can understand in one reading.

That sounds simple, but lots of writing fails this test. Too many writers feel that if their writing is clear to them, it will be clear to others.

If a word or sentence has two possible interpretations, the writer will know which is intended. But the reader

doesn't have this advantage, and may see it the other way.

So what can you do to make sure your writing is clear? Here are two suggestions.

**First**, you should ask someone else to read your draft. (This is a suggestion we'll revisit often.) It's impossible for the writer, who knows the intent, who's been working and reworking the sentences, to see them as a new reader would. So get some fresh eyes — another competent person to give you a different perspective.

Here's a good rule for people who write for distribution outside the office: Nothing goes out until it has been read by at least one person other than the writer. For important stuff, make that at least two other people.

**Second**, all writers, editors, and proofers should remember that it's not enough to write so that you can be understood; you must write so that you *can not be misunderstood*. It's sort of a Murphy's Law for writers, and it can prevent lots of grief.

Any good grammar course will cover specific usage points that often cause misunderstanding. But most writers already know how to fix these problems, once they see them. Even if they aren't sure about the cause, they can revise until the meaning is clear.

So a skeptical eye is more important than knowledge of grammar rules. Look hard for any word or sentence that could possibly be misinterpreted, and do what's needed to fix it.

## **It's Concise**

“Concise writing,” according to writing teacher Walt Skretch, “means saying the same thing — *once*.”

Many groups — educators, lawyers, government employees — have been accused of producing writing that is intended to impress rather than to express.

It's easy to pretend that only other people produce fat writing. The truth is that almost all writers, including experienced professionals, often write wordy first drafts.

But many of these professionals find that it's more effective to keep up the momentum of writing, to plunge on through to the end, and then to come back later and begin the job of trimming down.

Sure, you can learn to write more concisely from the beginning. But don't get the idea that your first drafts are ready to be shipped out the door to the waiting public. This just doesn't happen, even to professionals.

For anything more complex than a note to your kids or a co-worker, make sure you go back over it to trim extra words. Or better still, let a good editor do it.

## **It's Correct**

When we say that our writing must be “correct,” we usually mean that it must be reasonably free of errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and word usage. That's not a bad working definition. But it might help if we also take a look at what we *don't* mean by the word.

One of the most widespread ideas is that somewhere out there is an authority that can answer all our usage

questions. There isn't. Our language is constantly changing, and what's acceptable at one time and place is unacceptable in another.

Good writers know that many words have variant spellings, pronunciations, and definitions — all acceptable. They know that Shakespeare spelled his own name different ways, that early editors would choose a spelling to fit the space available, and that *ain't* was perfectly acceptable for many years.

All that said, we still have to produce writing that conforms to some standard of acceptability. In most of our work-related writing, we use “formal standard English,” with rules that are:

- Based on the written language of established writers
- Codified in English grammar texts
- Taught in schools
- Reinforced by editors, teachers, and writers

### **Suggestions for Correctness**

Here are a few specific suggestions, boiled down to what has proved most helpful to writers we've known:

- Decide which style manual your group or office will use
- Recognize that it won't answer all your questions
- If you need to, start your own style sheet (for yourself or your work group)
- If possible, designate a “decider” for arguable questions
- Be open to reasonable exceptions to the rules
- Change the rules when you need to

## — THE WRITING — PROCESS

### **We're All Different**

No two people speak or write exactly the same way. Your personal pattern (called your *idiolect*) is also unique — nobody else knows or uses precisely the same words you do, or uses them in the same way. Every skilled and successful writer has developed a style that is unlike anyone else's.

But most successful writers do have some things in common. One of the most important is that they've learned to take their writing through a process — a series of steps — that they know will get them from the idea stage through to the finished written product.

They don't all use the same process, of course. But there is a lot of commonality, and the one we describe here combines the steps that many good writers follow.

All these steps are important. If you learn and follow them, your writing *will* improve. We strongly recommend that you work through them all, making sure you understand the importance of each one. Later, you can vary the steps, tailoring them to fit the specific needs of your immediate writing task.

Let's start by looking at the whole process, then we'll focus on each step.

## Steps in the Writing Process

**Step One:** Establish Your Purpose and Identify Your Reader

**Step Two:** Get Organized

**Step Three:** Write a First Draft

**Step Four:** Age the Draft

**Step Five:** Reread the Draft

**Step Six:** Revise

**Step Seven:** Edit

**Step Eight:** Proofread

### Step One: Establish Your Purpose and Identify Your Reader

This step sounds so basic that you may think it's not necessary to mention it. But it's one of the most important of these steps, and it's very often overlooked.

People too often identify only the topic, then jump right in and begin writing without giving much thought to their readers or their purpose. But without a clear understanding of both, it's hard to produce good writing.

Here's what H.J. Tichy, a respected writing teacher, has to say:

*A clearly established statement of purpose is the most important single requirement for effective technical writing. You simply can't make sure you've done something well unless you know what it was you intended to do.*

So start by thinking hard about who is going to read your piece, and what you want it to accomplish. Then

write a short and simple statement of your purpose. Reread and revise it until it clearly says what you want it to say.

## **Step Two: Get Organized**

The writing process can be boiled down to two steps.

Planning and organizing

Writing and rewriting

What most people fail to realize is that the first step is at least as important as the second. Over the years we've found that the majority of writing problems (our own as well as our students') can be traced back to inadequate planning and organizing.

So a plan, an organized structure or skeleton, is essential to good, clear writing. And your plan must be developed with two things in mind: what your purpose is, and who your readers are.

This does not mean that your plan must be long and complex. In fact, you don't always have to make a formal outline before you begin your draft. Sometimes you will need to do only two things in this planning and organizing stage.

### **Two Essentials**

At a minimum, you should make a carefully thought-out list of the points needed to achieve your purpose, and put these points in some kind of logical order.

Next, ask yourself if you have the information and resources you need to make those points. If not, make filling those gaps part of your plan.