

the basic knowledge and strategies that successful writers have and practise—the principles and strategies that we cover in *The Professional Writing Guide*.

How is this book different from other 'business-writing' books?

It is different in two main ways.

First, it is based on the recent upsurge in research on writing—primarily in the US workplace—attention that was previously given almost exclusively to academic and creative writing. What questions have writing researchers been asking?

- How do readers read/comprehend/remember?
- How can writers cater for different readers' abilities and needs?
- Can using computers to write help corporate writers produce 'higher quality' documents faster, more efficiently, and more cheaply?
- How are other new technologies changing writing?

Our book is based on this research and on our extensive consulting to Australian organisations. In fact, the original impetus for the book came from endless requests from our corporate clients for a comprehensive guide to the management of writing within organisations. Because we were unable to recommend one, we decided to write our own.

Second, we do not present the unsubstantiated folklore, 'quick tips', and 'textbook rules' usually found in writing guides, because we have found them to be either too vague or too prescriptive for untrained writers faced with complex stylistic decisions. Instead, we have based this book on a distillation of the principles that underlie effective writing.

Another issue that we have stressed throughout the book is that writing always exists in a context. We go beyond the simplistic rules into the situational context of professional writing, using examples based on our direct experience of the organisational environment. The skilled writer goes beyond knowledge of the appropriate format and mechanical correctness, to the way in which the document will be used in the larger communication context of the organisation.

Although writing is a mainstream activity in most organisations, up until now management has too often dismissed its importance until there is a crisis such as a deadline for a crucial report or proposal. As we move through the nineties there is no doubt that writing will increasingly be vitally important within organisations, as more and more people will need to be kept more fully informed. Writing extends the possibilities for thinking, and advances in technology to date have offered no evidence that machines can think and write for themselves the way humans can.

Finally, we would like to caution readers not to assume that our advice is eccentric merely because it occasionally varies from what is commonly taught in Australian classrooms. Writing the book engendered a great deal of discussion between us because of our different backgrounds. Our editor comes from a different background from either of us. We hope that the end result practises what we have advocated.

WRITING IN THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

from Petelin, R. & Durham, M. (2003)
~~(1992)~~
— The Professional Writing Guide: Writing
well and knowing why Crows Nest, Allen
Unwin pp 1-13

Organisational writing is specialised. To be an effective writer in the business environment, you need to have excellent general writing skills and to understand the complex communication choices involved. Knowing how writing is structured in an organisation and what is acceptable helps you to shape your writing so that it communicates successfully.

WHAT CAN GO WRONG?

If you are like most writers in organisations, you have sufficient skill in writing to escape being labelled a poor communicator. To write effectively, however, you should be aware of how your writing is affected by the organisation itself, operating as a writing environment. This writing environment is complex: some writing researchers estimate that it takes up to three or four years for an employee to gain the needed organisational skill to produce successful documents (Paradis and others, 1985, p. 302).

Part of this complexity stems from organisational writing being both socially-oriented and task-oriented. As an organisational writer, you are writing messages to link with others (social) to undertake some action (task), for example, to provide answers, explain a problem, co-ordinate an activity, or persuade others about a choice. Whether these messages become communication (that is, your reader picks up your intended meaning) depends on how well you handle a range of complex choices associated with the document, the reader, and the organisation itself.

Your chance of communicating successfully is lessened when problems crop up in any of these three areas. For example, even a simple written request from a supervisor asking staff to comment on a new piece of equipment can fail because of any one of the following problems (see Figure 1.1).

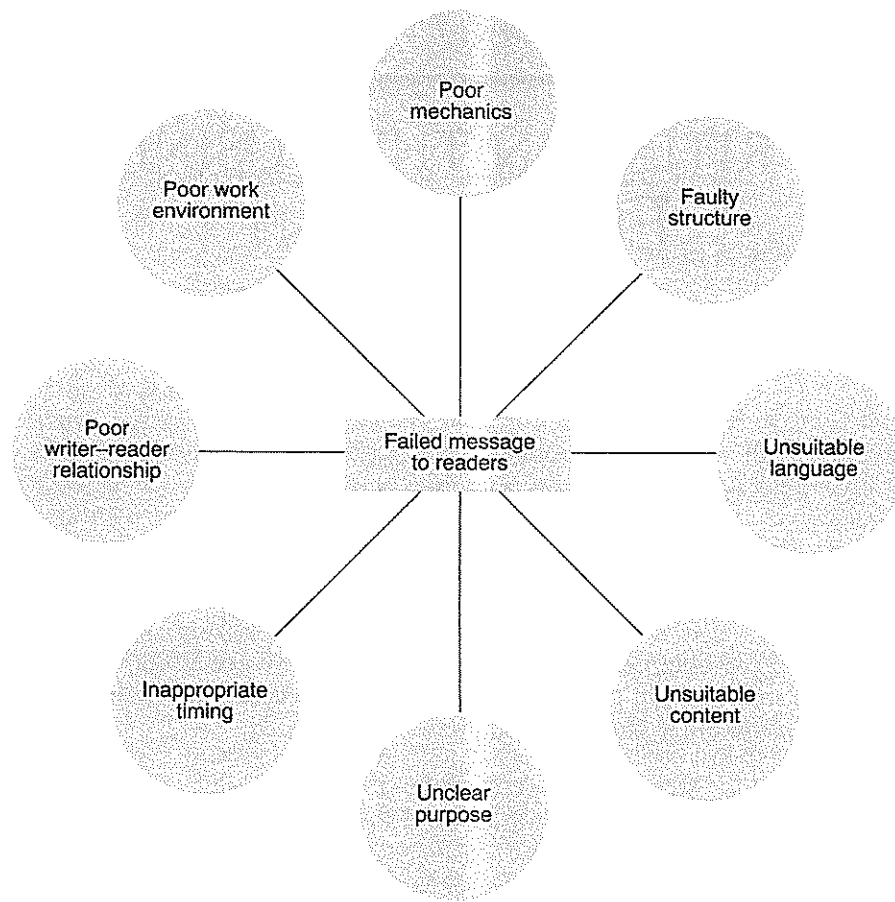


Figure 1.1 Problems which can lead to a failed message to your readers

- **Poor mechanics**—poor punctuation or spelling can frustrate readers by making them re-read to understand the message.
- **Faulty structure**—poor sentence structure can confuse or mislead readers. For example, a misplaced clause may force readers to recast the sentence mentally for it to make sense.
- **Unsuitable language**—difficult words, for example, may cause readers to ‘turn off’.
- **Unsuitable content**—too many trivial or irrelevant points can cloud the subject and confuse readers.
- **Unclear purpose**—readers may miss a document’s communication if its purpose is not made clear soon enough.
- **Inappropriate timing**—timing can affect a document’s success, and even give a message which contradicts that of the document. For example, if staff receive a memo after the requested return date they will believe their views are not valued.

- **Poor writer–reader relationship**—a poor relationship between the writer and his or her readers increases the chances of the document being ‘mis-read’ or ignored.
- **Poor work environment**—if the general work environment is not conducive to effective communication, staff may be less inclined to act on a document. Communication can be adversely affected by physical elements (noise, overcrowding, poor lighting and ventilation) as well as emotional elements (a repressive organisational climate).

‘SATISFICING’ AS AN ORGANISATIONAL WRITER

Effective business writers solve many of these potential problems and produce successful documents by **satisficing**. This term, coined by organisational theorist Herbert A. Simon, describes practical decision-making based on probabilities. Because it is impossible to gather complete information, writers can never write with full knowledge of an issue. Organisational writers do not have the time or the resources to explore all possibilities and test all alternatives. Instead, they ‘satisfice’ by selecting the most satisfactory solution according to their knowledge of the present conditions and influences within the organisation.

Efficient organisational writers are adept ‘satisficers’ who can create an effective document for particular readers in the time given. They can do so because they understand the organisation’s culture and the effect of this culture on communication.

LEARNING AN ORGANISATION’S COMMUNICATION ETIQUETTE

Part of knowing an organisation’s writing environment lies in your ability to see it also as a culture, with some things being acceptable and others being taboo. The accepted communication in the organisational culture makes up what is known as its communication ‘etiquette’. Just as you may kiss goodbye in one culture and shake hands in another, how you write is affected by your sense of an organisation’s etiquette.

The etiquette is not only what is written down in a company’s style manual. Communication etiquette deals with the often unspoken agreements about when and how you write, and to whom. Your acceptance and success in the organisation can be influenced by your knowledge of this etiquette, that is, your understanding of ‘what is worth communicating, how it can be communicated, what other members... are likely to know and believe to be true about certain subjects, how other members can be persuaded...’ (Faigley, 1985, p. 238).

Part of the communication etiquette which new employees must grapple with includes

- who they should or should not write directly to

- when writing is preferred over speaking face-to-face or telephoning
- what tone is appropriate in memos and letters
- and when and how they represent the organisation to the outside world.

Writers new to the corporate world lack experience with communication etiquette and thus face three major writing problems: developing ideas, acknowledging readers, and meeting deadlines.

Problem one: Trouble developing ideas

New organisational writers may have problems developing their ideas into documents. They may not be familiar with the organisation's usual format or structure for specific documents, such as proposals. They may not know what is commonly included or how much they are expected to research, that is, to check sources, read, and ask questions. Successful ideas are usually those that fit in with the organisation's plans and directions, so, to become effective, these new writers must also become knowledgeable about what is going on in the organisation and develop their writing within this context.

Problem two: Not acknowledging readers

Juggling not only what to write but how to write to a specific reader can be difficult for new writers, because selecting incorrectly can be highly embarrassing. Inexperienced organisational writers may find it difficult to understand the organisational status or role of their reader. For example, Susan, when asked by her director during a morning tea-break to comment on a topic, replied to what she thought was an informal request with an equally informal, handwritten memo. She was shocked when it was distributed at a formal meeting for senior staff.

Problem three: Not meeting deadlines

Inexperienced organisational writers may have little idea of the importance of deadlines. They may not fully understand that missing a newsletter's copy deadline means a 'hole' in page three or that not getting a report to the secretary in time means that their material is not distributed for a board meeting.

THE ETIQUETTE OF COMMUNICATION FLOWS

To understand the communication etiquette of your own organisation, you need to know how it can be influenced by the directional flow of communication within your workplace.

Communication etiquette is partly determined by the hierarchical structure of an organisation. Communication flows through the hierarchy in different directions: upwards, downwards, and across. Each direction presents potential problems for organisational writers. We describe some of these

problems below and suggest strategies used by effective communicators to handle them.

Handling upward communication

Your chances to communicate upward, above your immediate superior, are limited. Few organisations condone open communication throughout. For example, you may contribute much at one organisational level but be effectively barred as a 'major player' at higher levels because you do not receive the necessary information to participate. Access to information, organisational roles, and duty statements suggest to us our place in the organisation's communication flow.

Some organisations, however, suppress upward communication more openly. They may rule that communication above one's immediate manager is forbidden. Or they may ignore staff's attempts to communicate upward. An excellent example of this is how the suggestion box is used in two different organisations. In one, employees get no information about how suggestions are handled, so the box is ignored. In the other organisation, replies to the suggestions are posted. Because employees see that their communication is attended to, they use the box. Both organisations seem to provide a means of upward communication, but the communication etiquette shows that only one supports it.

Organisational writers may not only be denied access to those higher up, but also find that their documents move upward without their knowledge, sent on by the intended reader. Not knowing who else 'higher up' will read your document makes it more difficult to choose what and how to write.

To effectively communicate upward, you must find the acceptable way to do so within your organisation. Two main variables affect your success: your superior's attitude to you and your expertise on the topic. If you have a good relationship with your superior, you have more chance of your document being forwarded to others—unaltered, with your name on it! You must also have something to communicate. Look for opportunities to write with not only your immediate readers in mind, but also a possible reader higher up in the organisation. Often it is all in the focus. If you are writing a report of a business trip, for example, you can make it a simple diary of events or highlight what is most relevant to the organisation. Which has a better chance of being sent from your manager to his or her superiors? Effective organisational writers weigh up the chances of any document being sent upward and plan it accordingly.

They also understand the peculiar etiquette of filtering in an organisation. Filtering is the selection of what information to make known to your manager. It is generally assumed that staff filter out 'bad news' and focus on what is good when communicating upward. They may sometimes not even commit themselves to writing, as it creates a permanent record of their decisions, whether right or wrong. The staff member knows how to filter appropriately and when to choose writing over face-to-face communication when communicating upward.

Handling downward communication

Downward communication can present problems when the amount is inappropriate, the content is irrelevant, or the information is distorted.

The amount of written communication that an employee must cope with is increasing. No longer is it assumed that subordinates need to know only whatever is pertinent to their immediate duties. They are often expected to read more and more and, as a result, they may respond by leaving unread much of the material which crosses their desk or shows up on their computer screen.

Staff trying to cope with too much to read may, paradoxically, suffer from information 'underload' if too many of the documents are about trivial matters. For example, one organisation sent out three messages about the revised date of a minor social function but only one short, incomplete memo about a major funding proposal. This lop-sided flow of downward information is common in many organisations.

As in any other flow, downward communication can suffer from distortion, especially when too many people are involved in preparing the document. Accidental distortions are common. 'Gatekeeping', in which some people manage or control communication, creates power flows within the organisation which can then further distort communication.

The effective writer copes with these problems of downward communication by being sensitive to how much people will read, and attempting to balance the need to restrict the amount of information sent downward with the problems of distorting information as a result.

Handling horizontal communication

Horizontal communication flows across the organisational structure, between people at the same level. Communicating effectively with colleagues requires skill and a certain amount of intuition. There seem to be fewer established etiquette rules for horizontal communication than there are for upward or downward communication. This is not because horizontal communication is more simple. Communicating with others at the same hierarchical level includes making choices such as how colleagues should be addressed, what communications others should receive, how much background information they need, and when a written message is more appropriate than a spoken one.

Make the wrong choice and you might alienate or even lose a possible ally. For example, when Renee wanted the same newly-vacant office as her colleague, Colin, she was told to come to an agreement with him. Instead, she chose to move in without consulting Colin and tried to deflect his possible anger by sending him what she thought was a humorous memo. The result? Colin was upset not only about Renee's action but also about what he interpreted as a 'proprietary', smug note. Renee won her office, but lost her colleague's support.

Handling informal communication

Upward, downward, and horizontal directions comprise the formal flows of organisational communication. But communication also flows informally within the organisation, in a network pattern, as people connect with others whom they consider to be good sources for information. Networks cross the formal hierarchy of the organisation, for these connections rely on people's friendship or common interests.

Much has been written about networking, the art of developing your informational network of professional contacts. The network is usually regarded as being made up of spoken communication, but effective communicators do not neglect writing. For example, a thank you note may be treasured far more than a telephone call. Verifying conversations, especially agreements, with written messages is also common. The informational network within an organisation has been helped, interestingly, by the advent of photocopiers, for they have made it easier for people to spread information. Unless a document is marked 'strictly confidential'—and even this is no guarantee—its potential readers can be innumerable.

WRITING TO MEET A CHALLENGE

Many potential writing problems can be avoided by planning the writing task, that is, deciding why you are writing. The first step in planning is to acknowledge that you are writing to make something happen. This 'something' is often called the writing problem that you need to solve. We prefer the term 'writing challenge', as it has more positive connotations.

You may not think that straightforward business writing presents a writing challenge. However, consider the example of Harry, an office manager who wants to raise staff morale. He is writing a memo to encourage his staff to attend the annual Christmas party. If the memo is not effective, he will not gain his goal, that is, to make staff interested and gain their co-operation.

Harry's first attempt incorporates essential information like the time and place, plus a cartoon to give the idea of 'fun'. He includes this statement: 'Cost \$20-\$25 includes food and wine'. When he realises that staff have not responded to the memo, he asks around and discovers that the light drinkers are complaining that the set price means that they must 'subsidise' the heavy drinkers. Harry tries again, with a second memo that reads in part: 'Cost \$15 per head—for the banquet (payable in advance). Drinks are to be ordered and paid for individually'. When the response is still low, he follows this memo up with a third one, which reads in part

The basic charge for the meal will be \$15. This money will be collected before the meal and individuals and/or groups will order and pay for their drinks over and above this charge. It will make settling up the final

account easier and avoid quibbling over the variation that alcohol consumption will cause to the basic price.

In this example, the writer finally meets the writing challenge by thinking through not only what he wants the message to contain, but also what result he wants it to have. The emphasis is on communicating to others, not just creating a message. To communicate effectively in the corporate setting, you must understand the particular situation and your readers. To think through a writing challenge, use the questions commonly asked by journalists, that is, 'How?' and 'Who?', 'What?', 'Where?', 'When?', 'Why?' (the H and five Ws).

Consider the writing challenge presented to Jean, an investment counselor who advises public servants on the verge of receiving substantial superannuation payouts. The legislation is complex and changeable, and she has been spending too much time explaining details in the initial interview with potential clients. The answer seems to be to construct an explanatory letter which the potential client can digest at leisure. The communication challenge for Jean is to inform potential clients and encourage them to go ahead with the investment. How can this be done? Imagine that you are preparing this letter and ask yourself the H and five Ws.

How?

How to meet the communication challenge comprises many choices, from stationery to tone. (These are taken up in later chapters.)

Organisation

How will you organise the information? Most readers appreciate a document that is structured from their individual perspective. However, this does not mean that all writing should be individualised. If most of your potential clients need the same information, you can boilerplate some parts of the letter (that is, use the same information).

Word choice

How will you handle terminology? Thinking of your readers in this example, can you avoid terms like reasonable benefit limits and annuity escalation rate? If not, do you need to provide a glossary of terms? Word choice also contributes to the tone of the document.

Appearance

The letter to your potential client communicates through its appearance, from the logo design to the colour, type, and weight of the stationery itself. The letter's layout also gives a message, as seemingly minor choices such as margins and punctuation can suggest certain qualities to your reader.

Amount

Writers can provide too much or too little information to their readers. In this example, giving too much information can create problems both for your reader (who may tire or become confused) and yourself (who may be giving away too much free information). Think what the reader has requested or expects and adjust the amount of information accordingly.

Who?

Who are your readers? In this example, the primary reader is a specific potential client, someone who has already been to see you. You can assume a bond between you, as you know some of the person's specific interests. Remember that your reader probably has an attitude not only to the subject matter but also to you as the originator. Predicting this attitude can help you choose your material and your method of presentation.

Other potential readers who influence what and how you write could include other financial advisers in your company or your counterparts in other companies.

What?

What do your readers want to know? What do they need to know? In this example, some of your readers may want more financial details and even computer projections of their investment options. Others may expect you to make decisions for them. A clear idea of the 'what' of the task is essential to help you make appropriate communication decisions.

Where?

Where will you get your information? In this case, someone in your position would have a great deal of knowledge about the subject matter. You may still need to supplement this with discussions with colleagues and government personnel, as well as information you pick up in specialist books or the financial pages of newspapers and magazines.

When?

When is your deadline? If you have suggested a response in your initial interview, assess when you can realistically complete this required work and send the letter. If you work with multiple deadlines or large projects, using a time and task chart can help you schedule sub-deadlines for your writing tasks. You can develop the chart as a flow chart (see Figure 1.2) or a Gantt chart (see Figure 1.3). The Gantt chart allows you to show overlapping duties. For example, in Figure 1.3, the writer is planning two activities, editing a draft and consulting Person X, on the same day, 11. 9. Whichever chart you use, the important point is to start from your deadline and work backwards, writing in all the tasks that you need to finish and the time that these will take.

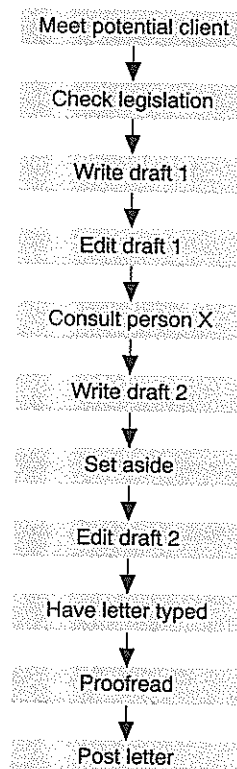


Figure 1.2 Flow chart of writing sub-tasks

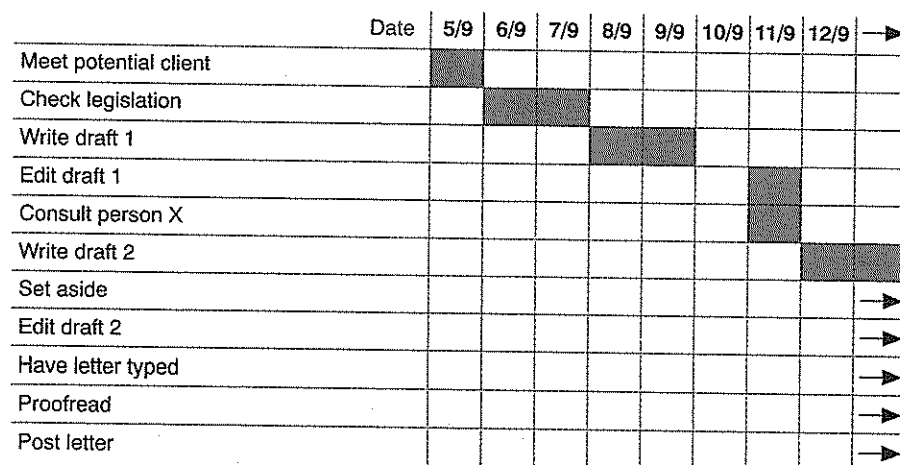


Figure 1.3 Gantt chart, showing writing sub-tasks and dates

The 'when' question can also be used to designate the document's time frame for its topic. Are you writing about an event in the past, present, or future? The time frame may dictate how much you need to include for your readers, or how your points should be ordered.

Why?

When writing business documents, one aim is usually to complete a task—we communicate information which helps others complete tasks. For example, we write to others to inform, inquire, request, motivate, and persuade. A survey of 265 professionals at twenty research and development organisations showed that 30 to 50 per cent thought that certain task-functions of writing were 'vitally important' to

- provide answers to specific questions
- keep others informed about major activities
- help plan and co-ordinate activities (individual and organisational)
- analyse the elements and interrelationships of a situation
- instruct others
- establish accountability.

(Anderson, 1985, p. 63)

When writing business documents our aim is also to develop a relationship. We use writing to establish a type of professional relationship with the reader. This relationship is dependent on the 'tone' of our documents.

For the investment advice letter, your tasks are to save yourself time and provide information. You can also develop your relationship with the potential client. For example, highlighting your knowledge of the legislation can help to persuade and reassure.

IMPROVING YOUR PROFESSIONAL WRITING

In the above example, we illustrated how to focus on the writing challenge, and use it to help you understand the writing choices available. A large part of improving your writing is becoming aware of these choices and systematically applying them to your writing tasks. It is also beneficial to work on specific problems or types of writing with a writing expert (for example, enrol in a short writing course). If this is not possible, you can still undertake activities which can help you become a better professional writer.

First, set a two-week period to become aware of your writing habits. During this time, analyse your writing: think about your writing process and evaluate the documents that you produce. This means that you are going off automatic pilot and no longer using your familiar, subconscious writing habits.

During this time, you can also practise being a meticulous writer. Give yourself more time than usual for your writing tasks, such as finding ideas (Chapter 3), evaluating them (Chapter 4), writing (Chapters 6 and 7), rewriting (Chapter 11), and setting out your work (Chapter 12). As you write

and revise, spend extra time checking your spelling, word use, and punctuation. Keep standard reference books within reach. We recommend a large dictionary like *The Macquarie*, a general style manual like the *Style Manual* published by the Australian Government Publishing Service, and a good usage book like H.W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. Consult these books frequently to learn about language and become more confident about your writing.

Should you brush up on grammar? This is a difficult question. Research has shown that learning grammar alone does not necessarily improve writing. However, if you do not know language fundamentals, you may not be able to appreciate that some expressions are considered less acceptable. Some training in language structure gives you the necessary terminology to understand instructional books on writing and to discuss writing more specifically. Unfortunately, few grammar textbooks are adequate for the needs of organisational writers. Our chapter on sentences (Chapter 7) provides a guide to sentence-level problems.

As well as practice and study, there are other activities to help you improve your writing.

- Read!—Most good writers are people who read. It does not matter what, although it is helpful to read the works of people generally known to be good writers. Reading journals or magazines in your profession can show you different ways to approach and develop a familiar subject.
- Collect writing guides—Save examples of clear, uncluttered writing in the formats that you commonly use, for example, letters and reports. When you need to write in the same format, use these examples as guides to appropriate tone, language, length, type of development.
- Incubate—Learn to set aside your work, when possible, to give your brain a chance to incubate ideas. This time also allows you to return to your document with fresh eyes for picking up mistakes and inconsistencies.
- Write more—Jot notes to yourself, sketch plans, develop your ideas in writing. Keep a notebook with you for recording notes throughout the day.
- Write differently—It is sometimes helpful to get a new slant on your usual writing by trying something completely different. For example, try some experimental creative writing like simple 'word-picture' poems. Or keep a diary to challenge yourself to explain and describe each day. Enrol in a recreational writing class to learn to play with words and get feedback on your writing.
- Have someone edit your work—You can help someone be a good editor of your work by stipulating only one or two items to look for, for example, logical flow and clearly-stated purpose. However, be prepared for inappropriate criticism, particularly as you begin to communicate more efficiently. For example, a simply written document is sometimes still considered inappropriate organisational writing. If you think that some criticism is unwarranted, ask for more specific feedback. Requiring

your critics to put into words what seems wrong often indicates that the real problem rests not with the writer but with the reader ('You didn't mention the company's name enough'), or the organisation's actions (inadequate briefing or inappropriate use of the document).

- Find other writers—If others in your organisation are interested in writing, you may be able to persuade your staff development section to run writing courses. Join professional communication associations, as some sponsor regular communication lectures, workshops, and journals.

CONCLUSION

Effective business writers use their knowledge of an organisation's communication etiquette to develop successful documents. Each writing task involves a communication challenge, as the writer attempts to meet the needs of readers and answer questions ('How?' and 'Who?', 'What?', 'Where?', 'When?', 'Why?') concerning the purpose of the document. Professional writers can improve their writing by pursuing different opportunities, such as coursework, editing by others, involvement in professional communication associations, and staff development activities. Writing regularly can also improve writing.

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