



# Better Business Writing

**IDEAS FOR BETTER WRITING**

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# 1. Introduction

## What is good report writing anyway?

Business writing is different to academic. It is written with a purpose.

- How much time do you waste on having to re-do your letters and business documents repeatedly?
- How much time do you waste reading badly written documents or emails?

The most significant cause of writing problems is the failure to clarify thoughts before starting to write. Followed by failing to edit effectively and proofread precisely.

## Skim readers need plain English

The main advantages of plain English are:

1. It is faster to write
2. It is faster to read
3. You get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way.

Clarity of thought is important in all areas of business, and you must know the aim of your writing before you begin. Using the right words and phrases, avoiding jargon, and being logical will make your words easier to understand. Words that are understood are acted on and action makes for more productivity.

Careful consideration of the reader's needs and expectations is the basis of good practical writing.

Some essential qualities are:

- Clear organisation
- Clear expression
- Relevant content
- Appropriate style

The first two of these meet the reader's needs. The third and fourth satisfy the reader's expectations.

Everyone writes at work but not everyone has learnt how to write for business.

Good writing does not require a particular talent, but a sound knowledge of its building blocks, a set of techniques that generate readable content and processes that guarantee quality control.

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*Tip: Examine other people's writing critically*

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Start to pay more attention to the emails, online content and reports you are sent to ready. Learn what you like and dislike and how others express themselves.

## Why good writing matters

*'Unconscious bias means that people will think less of you if your written communication contains errors or is badly written.'*

Good writing expresses your ideas sharply and economically. It enables the reader to understand what you are conveying readily without making unnecessary demands on them in terms of time or concentration. This minimises confusion or uncertainty, making communications more efficient.

Good writing also makes you more persuasive because it is intimately tied to reasoned argument. As such, it carries with it an authority, implying a thorough knowledge of the subject matter; it is also strongly associated with intelligence, so invites the reader's considered response.

Bad writing, by contrast, alienates the reader. It does this not only by suggesting the writer does not understand their subject but also by creating the impression of an amateur at work and, therefore, someone you may not implicitly trust in other aspects of business.

## Good writing is worth the work

Whatever we write, we want to be professional. We want our writing to be appropriate to the situation. Poor writing is bad business; it can cause confusion.

While there are many grammar rules, there are also some outdated ideas about business English. It is important to recognise the real rules and distinguish these from individual preferences / styles.

How to meet your readers expectations

1. Organise your thoughts, structure correctly.
2. Try to express, not impress.
3. State your main aim, point or objectives at the start.
4. Keep it short - short words, short sentences, short paragraphs.
5. Be positive and use the active voice.
6. Simplify complex subjects.
7. Need to basis only.
8. Highlight the main point with a heading on each paragraph.
9. Break-up the page visually
10. Error-free and on time.

## Five key points

### Have one main objective and purpose.

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*Tip: Always establish the aim and purpose of your writing before you begin*

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It is important to think of the reader - what are their needs? The answer to these questions will influence the order in which you present your ideas. There are two types of written messages:

1. Factual
2. Persuasive

Each of these requires a specific structure, and you must decide which is relevant to your aim.

### Two things to know

- What ACTION do you, the writer want?
- What REACTION should the reader have?

### Three things to make sure of – ABC

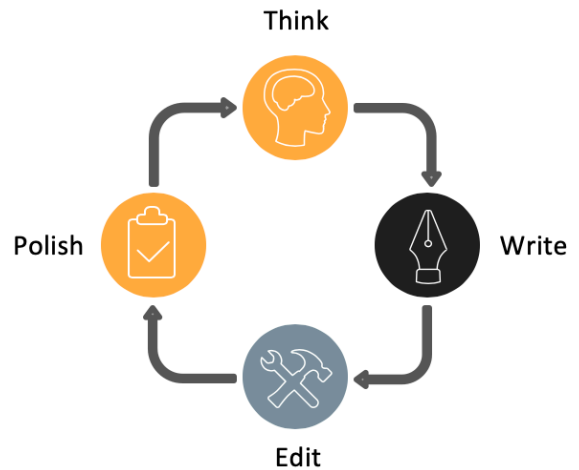
1. Accurate
2. Brief
3. Clear

### Four steps

1. Think
2. Write
3. Edit
4. Polish and proof

### Five key principles

1. Get straight to the point KISS.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Get rid of jargon, cliché, and waffle.



## 2. Tips for better writing

1. Try to express, not impress.
2. Get in and get out.
3. Keep it short – short words, short sentences, short paragraphs work. Trust me.
4. Think: are you on the offence or defence?
5. Deliver a clear message with the right style and tone.
6. Organise your thoughts, structure each section, page, and paragraph correctly.
7. Simplify complex subjects, keeping topics short and to the point.
8. Highlight the main point with a heading at the beginning of each paragraph.
9. Break-up the page visually and do not “talk past the point”.
10. Make sure your document is error free and accurate.

### **Better business writing summary**

Always establish the aim and purpose of your writing before you begin

1. What do I want to achieve with this letter or business document?
2. What do I want the reader to do or know after they has read it?
3. How should I best structure the writing?
4. Am I selling an idea, trying to persuade the reader, or instructing / informing the reader?

All these points concern the reader. The reader is more important than the writer. Always think of your reader before you begin to write.

The biggest cause of problems is the failure to clarify thoughts before starting to write, together with failing to edit and proofread correctly.

### **Good writing tips**

1. Organise your thoughts and structure each section, page, and paragraph correctly.
2. Simplify complex subjects, keeping topics short and to the point.
3. Highlight the main point with a heading at the beginning.
4. Break up the page visually, and do not “talk past the point”.
5. Make sure your document, email, report, or letter is error-free and accurate.

## How to edit, improve and change

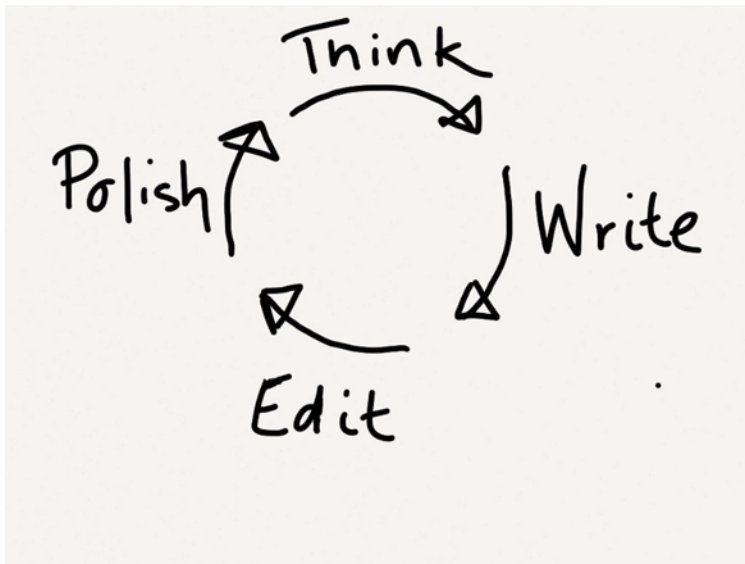
1. Correct use of headings, titles, and signposts
2. Could you get to the point and keep it simple?
3. Keep sentences down to 1.5 lines, around 15 words or fewer.
4. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
5. Change verbs and adjectives to create more accurate meaning.
6. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
7. Never use the passive when you can use the active.
8. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
9. Do not use vague terms or words – asap, try, later this week, etc

## Polish and proofread

This is about proof-reading for error-free copy

- Numbers, dates, names
- Grammar
- Spelling
- Missing words
- Page numbers, references, etc

### 3. Writing well



#### Planning the production process

The biggest cause of problems is the failure to clarify thoughts before starting to write. Eight steps to producing the correct structure:

- |                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| 1. <b>AIM</b>          | Establish the aim.  |
| 2. <b>COLLECT</b>      | Be creative! Dump or jot down your first thoughts and information first. This could be in a pattern form. |
| 3. <b>OUTLINE</b>      | Pause.  |
| 4. <b>GROUP</b>        | Group the ideas under headings into themes. Using Post-it notes can help this. Pause.                     |
| 5. <b>ORDER</b>        | Order and number the themes appropriate to aim.   |
| 6. <b>WRITE</b>        | Write bearing in mind the rules of aim and language.  |
| 7. <b>EDIT</b>         | As many times and the documents requires.   |
| 8. <b>PROOFREADING</b> | Nobody gets it right first time. Check and polish - is the tone right? Get someone else to read it.       |

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*Notice that the first steps involve thinking, and only the last two steps involve writing.*

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The next step is to order the material appropriate to the aim.

## **Definitions**

### **Drafting**

You put your ideas into complete thoughts, such as sentences and paragraphs. You organise your ideas in a way that allows the reader to understand your content and message.

### **Editing**

Editing is a process that involves revising the content, organization, grammar, and presentation of a piece of writing. The purpose of editing is to ensure that your ideas are presented to your reader as clearly as possible.

### **Proofreading ('polish')**

Proofreading focuses on checking for accuracy in smaller details of your work. You should proofread only after you have finished all your other revisions and editing.

## Clear expression from the start

Our words should be familiar ones that our readers will know.

We all have our own jargon, abbreviations, and technical vocabulary. Using this ‘specialist’ vocabulary is convenient – if everyone understands it. We should remember to use the above with our reader in mind. You may, unintentionally, exclude those who are not specialists in the same field.

Our writing should reflect a ‘user-friendly’ style. We want to appeal to our reader, as if they were standing in front of us and we were conversing with them.

We cannot write colloquially to our readers. We should not use slang or abbreviations – this would lead to a too casual approach.

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*The best tip when writing, is to ask yourself – would I say that if the reader was in front of me?*

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So often we use those old clichés which add nothing but insincerity to our writing. Tired and unimaginative clichés suggest tired and unimaginative thinking.

Sir Ernest Gowers in ‘The Complete Plain Words’ gives three rules:

- Avoid the superfluous
- Choose familiar words
- Choose precise words

Business writers, with style, prefer fewer words to more words. We should make every word count. We want, therefore, to eliminate unnecessary wordiness. Think of it as putting your written work on a diet! Through being economical with words, your reader will be encouraged to read on and act.

### Redundant words

Redundant words don’t do any work; they add no further meaning. The words crossed out are redundant.

1. black ~~in colour~~
2. cool ~~in temperature~~
3. visible to the eye
4. ~~most~~ unique
5. ~~advance~~ warning
6. ~~final~~ outcome

### Redundant words are not the same as repetition.

In its place, repetition can be a useful writing technique. It can emphasise a point or remind a reader of a key point. And repeating keywords can help maintain focus (whereas redundancy is needless repetition). Here is an example of repeating for effect. e.g., We cannot, we should not, and we shall not allow this company to merge.

Now reword these:

- At this moment in time
- At an early date / soon
- It came to light
- A wide range of
- Due to the fact that
- It is our understanding that
- We are of the opinion that
- This affords us the opportunity
- In the event that
- I am not in a position to
- In view of the fact that
- With the result that

Copy and paste any text into this free online tool for an instant grading. It is based on the writing style of Ernest Hemmingway. He is famous for his clean, precise, and compelling writing style.

Some links:

- <https://www.grammarly.com/>
- <http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>
- <http://gunning-fog-index.com/>
- <https://prowritingaid.com/>
- <https://openai.com/>

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*Microsoft Word now has some added writing tools as well.*

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## As easy as ABC

### ABC model



Our key aim is to be understood and gain some sort of action, result or feedback. However, many people do not think like that. Their aim is to sound important – to impress their readers.

Business writing is based on clear and concise vocabulary. We cannot compromise on accuracy – be it grammar, spellings, punctuation, or facts. We should, however, be brief and clear.

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*We should think of the **A B C** of business writing.*

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A good writer will always be specific and precise and avoids long words in rambling sentences where the message is lost.

There is no special language for business writing. You should write as you speak – as if you were delivering the message to a person sitting at the other side of your desk. You should avoid business clichés – often used because we can't think of a suitable alternative. Business writing is best when it is Accurate, Brief and Clear.

#### **Accurate**

Lack of accuracy will give the impression that the writer is slapdash or unsure of the facts or ignorant. So:

- Facts should be correct, complete, and relevant
- The reader should end up with the same picture in their mind as we have in ours
- Be specific about dates, times etc.
- Avoid ambiguous phrases
- Watch out for words which get confused through similar spellings and which will not be highlighted by a spelling check

## Brief

Keep it short because this saves the reader's time and makes understanding easier.

- 4% of readers will understand a 27-word sentence at first reading
- 75% of readers will understand a 17-word sentence at first reading
- 95% of readers will understand an 8-word sentence at first reading

If we aim to keep most sentences below 15 words their impact will be much greater. If a sentence is to have a strong impact it should be less than 10 words long. This means using:

- Shorter words when they convey the same meaning as longer words and avoiding words we would not normally use.
- Shorter phrases to simplify the structure of sentences.

## Clear

Clear writing results in quick, efficient reading without having to stop, check and re-read the communication. To make yourself clear:

- Start by making the subject and purpose of the communication clear with a proper introduction.
- Focus on the purpose of the communication and keep to the point.
- Avoid vague phrases and be precise wherever possible.
- Use headings and consistent numbering.
- Use jargon or technical language only when you are sure it will be understood.
- Imagine explaining the facts by speaking to the reader.
- Use the active, not the passive voice.
- State things in the positive, not negative.

e.g.    Passive: The contents of the flat were examined  
          Active: The police examined the contents of the flat  
          Passive: It was decided at the meeting that ...  
          Active: The meeting decided

## 4. Writing the first draft

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*‘Do not wait for inspiration; find it by starting to write.’*

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Steps to writing a first draft

1. Do your research and get your notes and ideas together.
  2. Put in the headings first or storyboard your ideas
  3. Fill in the gaps under the headings.
  4. Keep content short, brief, and basic.
  5. Write the first draft in full, before editing or checking
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*Tip: The hovering hands technique*

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When writing, hover your hands over the keyboard, and speak a sentence aloud before typing. Play around with different words and expressions. When you are happy, type. It can help to imagine the reader sitting and reading your document.

*‘Write as you would talk,  
but not as would chat.’*

The purpose of business writing is transactional. Of course, the content of business writing relates to a business entity, but it also relates to a specific and purposeful transaction between the writer and his or her audience. According to Brant W. Knapp, author of *A Project Manager’s Guide to Passing the Project Management Exam*, the best business writing can be ‘understood clearly when read quickly. The message should be well planned, simple, clear, and direct.’

Fast Facts: Basic Business Writing Goals

- **Convey Information:** Forms of business communication, such as research reports or policy memos, are written to disseminate knowledge.
- **Deliver News:** Professional writing is often used to share recent events and accomplishments with both internal and external audiences.
- **Call to Action:** Business professionals use writing in an attempt to influence others for numerous reasons including selling merchandise and passing legislature.
- **Explain or Justify an Action:** Professional communication allows a business entity to explain their beliefs or to justify their actions.

## Good writing style – more ideas

The following tips, adapted from Oxford Living Dictionaries, form a good foundation for business writing best practices.

1. **Put your main points first.** State exactly why you're writing upfront. One exception to this rule is for sales letters or emails. Reminding the recipient of a past meeting or a common connection you share is an acceptable way to open as it may influence the recipient to be more amenable to your intended aims.
2. **Use everyday words.** Using words such as 'about' rather than 'concerning,' 'expect' rather than 'anticipate,' and 'part' instead of 'component' will make your writing less stilted.
3. **Know your audience.** Unless it's aimed at an industry-specific audience, don't fill your writing with lots of technical jargon. Adjust your tone to suit your reader.
4. **Use active rather than passive verbs.** Active verbs allow the reader to comprehend quickly and understand more completely. For example, '*The decision was implemented to suspend production,*' leaves the interpretation of who made the decision to call it quits open. On the other hand, the meaning of, '*We've decided to suspend production,*' is clear.
5. **Write tight.** Again, using the example above, choosing the word 'decided' rather than 'made the decision' makes reading easier for the audience.
6. **Don't be beholden to rules in every situation.** This is a case of knowing your audience. If your aim is to make your writing conversational, it's fine to end a sentence with a preposition now and then, especially to improve flow and avoid awkward construction.
7. **Keep your font choices simple.** Stick to a nice, clean type style such as Helvetica or Times New Roman and limit the number of fonts you use in correspondence. Your goal is to write something legible and easy to read.
8. **Don't overuse visuals.** Visuals should be used at a minimum—they should not exceed 25% of your document, memo, email, report, etc. Too many graphics become confusing and often detract from the message you want to convey. A few powerful, well-placed graphics will accomplish more to get your point across than something that looks like a bad attempt at scrapbooking.

## 5. Reports and proposals

### How to write and a first draft of a report – TIPE

First draft. Read it back as the reader might see it. Does it express what you want to say, in the way you want to say it?

#### Topic

- What is it about?
- State it at the beginning, up-front and early.
- Consider using a summary paragraph or executive summary of the whole document or report.

#### Information

- What do the readers need to know?
- Present your information.
- Create a structure first (headings) and then fill in the content.

#### Purpose

- What do I, the writer, need to achieve?
- What is my aim and goal for the email, report, minutes, or summary?

#### Ending

- What happens next?
- Actions and key points
- Summary, conclusion

### Writing an Executive Summary

An Executive Summary is a non-technical introduction that provides a quick overview of the document on which it is based.

Its purpose is to consolidate the principal points of a document in one place.

After reading it, your readers should understand the main points you are making without having to read every page of your document.

#### Tops tips

- Rationale – explain why you wrote the report
- Emphasise your conclusions or recommendation – include only the most significant information to support your conclusions
- Write the executive summary after you have completed the report.
- Brevity – keep it concise. Remove extraneous information.
- Ask a 'neutral' person to read the executive summary and discuss what they've read.
- Length – keep within 1-2 pages. Spell-check and proofread – avoid relying solely on spellchecker as they will not catch wrong spellings that have slipped through, for example, *amy* instead of *may*.

**Remember:**

Think of your Executive Summary as a standalone document; it should be independent of the main report or proposal you are writing.

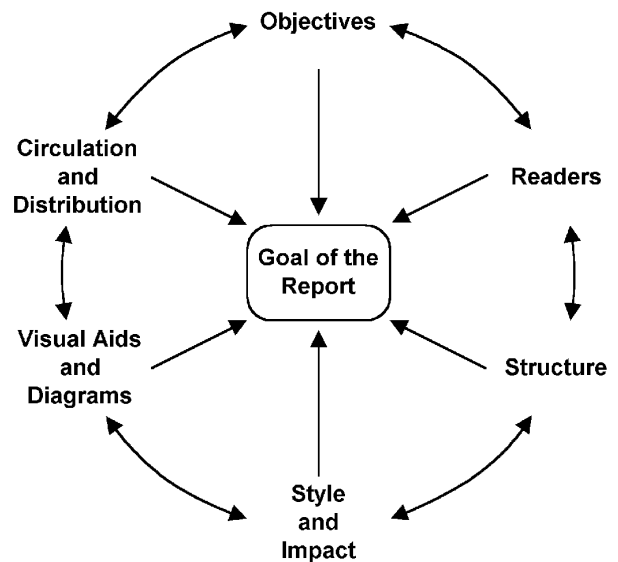
**Report writing key points**

**Reports should be:**

1. Clear
2. Compelling
3. Concise

**A formal report format should include:**

1. Title page
2. Contents list
3. Summary page
4. Introduction
5. Findings
6. Conclusions and recommendations
7. Appendices.



**The contents of a report should be:**

- At the right level
- Persuasive
- Precise
- Clear
- Concise
- Comprehensive.

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*Tip: Make your report as simple as possible, but no simpler.*

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## Report writing best practice

Nine key points

1. The reader is the most important person.
2. Keep the report as short as possible.
3. Organise for the convenience of the report user.
4. All references should be correct in all details.
5. The writing should be accurate, concise, and unobtrusive.
6. The right diagram with the right labels should be in the right.
7. Summaries give the whole picture, in miniature. Use them.
8. Check your report for technical errors, typing errors and inconsistency.
9. The report should look as good as it is

### The right points in right order

A logical sequence is vital for your report, proposal, or any document. We must sequence it so that it makes sense. There are a variety of ways to do this:

- **Chronological Order**  
Presents the material in time sequence.
- **Spatial / Place Order**  
Presents facts from a geographical perspective; North to South, East to West, top to bottom, inside to outside, near to far.
- **Deductive / Inductive Order of Importance**  
The deductive order starts with the most important point to gain attention; the inductive order starts with the least important point and builds.
- **Ascending Order of Complexity**  
Start with the simpler ideas first.
- **Descending Order of Familiarity**  
Move from the 'known' to the 'unknown'.
- **Cause and Effect**  
Because this happened, that happened.
- **Contrast**  
Presenting positive and negative aspects of a topic.
- **Problem / solution**  
Outline the problem then present the options / solutions you have considered.
- **Topic**  
When no other link exists simply deal with each topic separately.

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*A logical sequence can also create impact. You can get the reader's attention immediately – then guide them through the communication and reach a logical conclusion.*

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## The Pyramid Principle – a useful format

The key to clear report writing and proposal writing. Ideal for complex ide

### Minto's Pyramid Principle

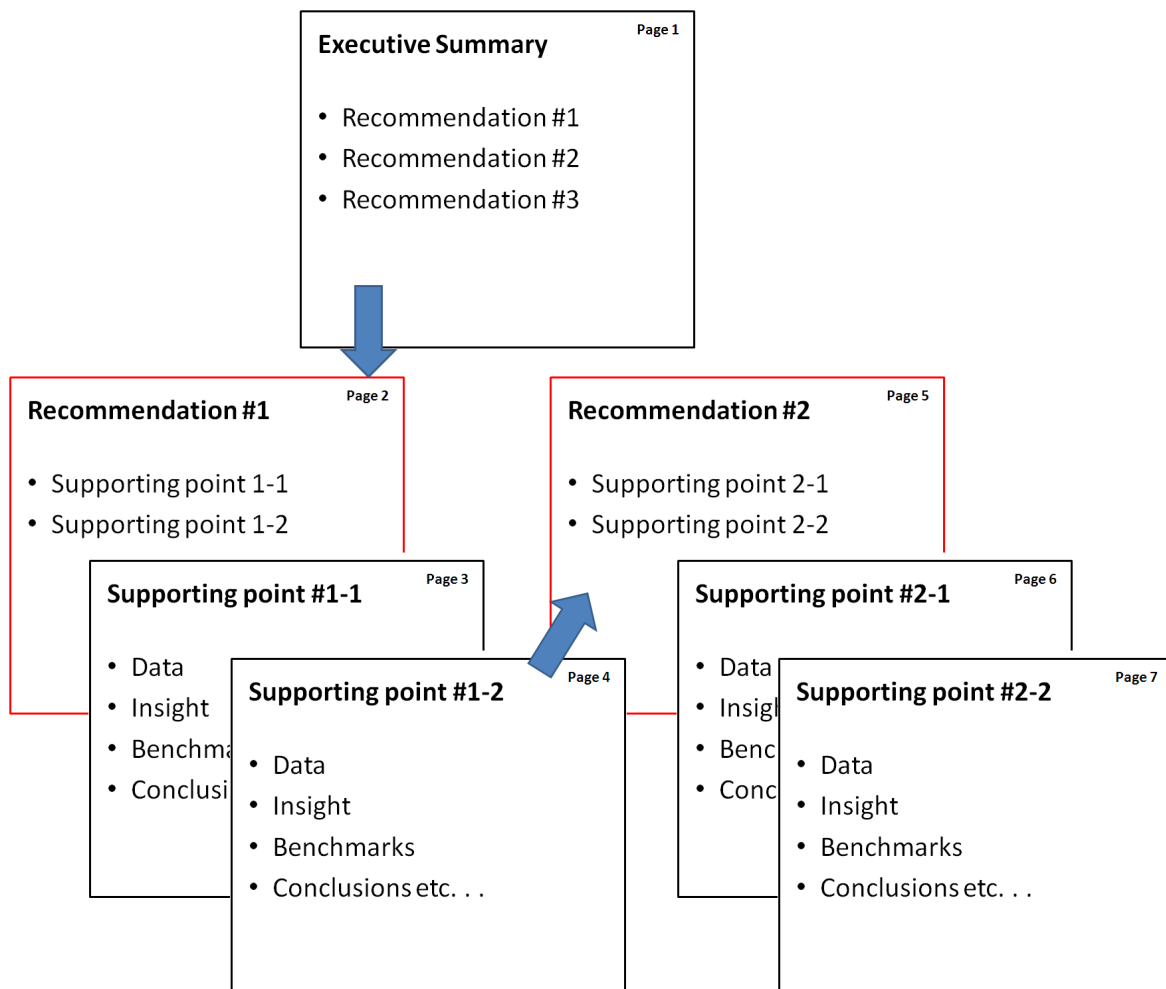
One excellent tool is the pyramid principle by an ex-McKinsey consultant by the name of Barbara Minto. She authored a book called The Minto Pyramid Principle. It defines the way consultants' structure most of their presentations. Most consultants will know what the pyramid principle is, even if they don't know the author.

Consultants often use groupings to clarify and simplify a problem. Too often clients are entrenched in their industry, corporate culture, and personal experience to rise above and see the root causes or drivers. The common client critique of consultants is, 'Well, of course, I could have told you that.' The [unspoken] consulting rebuttal might be, 'Yes, but you did not have the clarity of thought and persuasion to get your point across.'

**Pyramid Principle:** Just like the name implies, the idea is that the presentation logic looks like a pyramid. The main recommendation is on top. It is built on mid-level recommendations, each of which are supported by smaller facts, data, analysis, benchmarks etc . . .

In the graphic below you can see that the top of the pyramid (executive summary) has 3 recommendations. Each of those recommendations have supporting pages.

- Page 1 = executive summary
- Page 2-4 = recommendation #1 and supporting facts
- Page 5-7 = recommendation #2 and supporting facts



### **This type of report starts with the conclusion first**

It is a tops-down type of thinking that is very structured and how executives think. Big idea followed by smaller ideas. This format helps you 'cut to the chase' quickly, which is good for many reasons:

- Executives have a short attention span, so it is good to say what you want to say before they start asking questions
- This logic is very easy to follow. 'I recommend A,B,C. Recommendation A is supported by facts 1,2,3'
- giving them the recommendation and logic up front, it allows the audience to focus on the areas they have the most interest
- It forces the consultant to really hone the storyline to the most essential parts (no long-winded prose and rambling slides)

## Using the Pyramid Principle

It is important to use structured thinking in all your communication. Especially if you must present a recommendation to busy customer or colleague.

The key take-aways from the Pyramid Principle are:

1. Start with the answer first.
2. Group and summarize your supporting arguments.
3. Logically order your supporting ideas.

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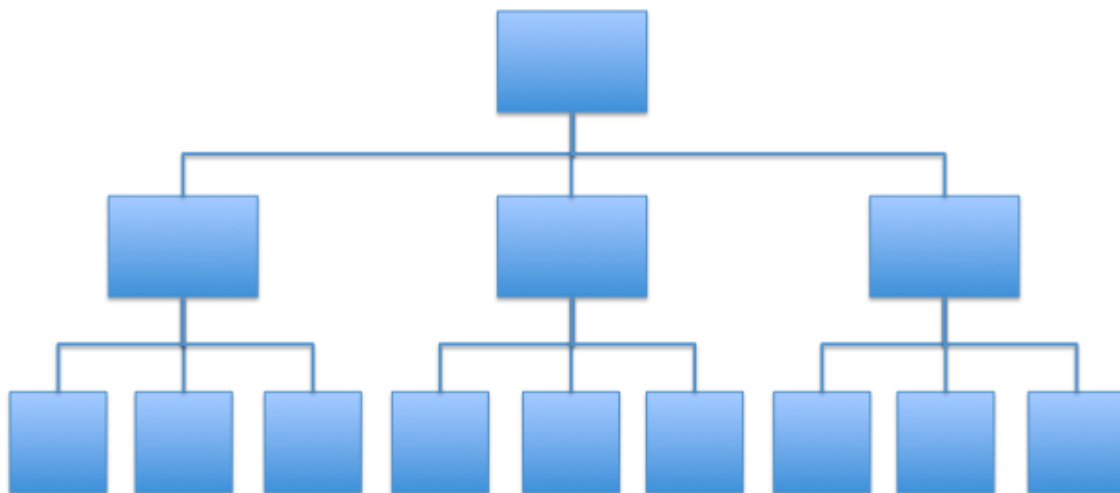
*Start with the answer first*

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## Group and summarise your supporting arguments

Your audience—whether listeners or readers—will naturally begin to group and summarize your arguments and ideas to remember them. So, you may as well help them do it and make your overall recommendation more effective and memorable.

The Pyramid Principle advocates that *'ideas in writing should always form a pyramid under a single thought.'* The single thought is the answer to the executive's question. Underneath the single thought, you are supposed to group and summarize the next level of supporting ideas and arguments. Then, for each supporting idea or argument, break that further into more ideas or arguments until you have formed a pyramid. The Pyramid Principle teaches that, *'Ideas at any level in the pyramid must always be summaries of the ideas grouped below them.'*



Decomposing an argument into a pyramid structure. It just so happens that the magic number of ideas in a group is three.

When you group and summarize your supporting arguments, it's easy to go from the single thought to the next level of ideas without getting too detailed right away.

## Example: Pyramid Principle (Minto)

Box 1: Your big Message or recommendations (maximum of three)

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Supporting arguments or recommendations (A, B, C)

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Data, evidence, facts, reasons


Therefore...(conclusion or call to action)

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(This is the same as Box 1)

## A special note on sales proposals

### Keep to the point

The key to a sales proposal is to say only what you need to say. There's no need to reel off endless facts about how great your product or service is, they've probably already judged this for themselves. So, telling them again will only make it seem like you think they're stupid and haven't been listening.

Treat your prospect as an intelligent being, draw on their past knowledge of your offering and keep your sales proposal succinct! Include an **executive or management summary** (for longer proposals) Any more than two pages of A4 is too much in my opinion, no one has the time or inclination to read any more than that.

### Offer choice

Now, while when I say keep it short and sweet, your sales proposal should offer some choice and options for your buyer. Not only will this let you sneak in some other (and more expensive) alternatives or promotions, but it will also make it seem that you've taken the time to craft a personal offer for your potential customer to get to the point of requesting a proposal.

### Customer focus

This is where so many keen people fail in their proposal writing. Demonstrate that you understand their needs and wants and give your proposal some substance. If you can't demonstrate now that you know their business' challenges, why on earth will they ever sign on the dotted line?

### Keep it short and simple

Now is not the time to throw lots of jargon at your prospect; keep it as simple as you can, without coming across as patronizing. You've done your pitch, they obviously liked it and can see value in your product, and, as a result, they aren't clueless as to what it is you can provide their business.

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*Keep it simple, but compelling and reassuring enough to encourage your buyer to choose your company as their supplier.*

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### Outline the next steps

You need to outline which of you will make the next move. And if you think it's right for this prospect, a proposal is the perfect place to ask for a signature, so why not make it an order form too?

## A few more points about sales proposals

### Address it to the buyer you haven't met.

The most important audience for your proposal isn't the people you've met. With them, you have a chance to explain what you're proposing. The most important people are the ones you haven't met and have no relationship with. That may include the top brass, of course.

### Make it easy to read

If the proposal is hard to follow, buyers will assume you'll be hard to work with. Do not include too much detail.

Also, provide a summary – preferably with lots of bullet points – that can stand on its own. Assume that many, if not most, of the decision makers will evaluate your proposal solely by what's in the summary.

### Make it about them, not you

Avoid the common pitfall that *'the buyer wants to learn about us.'* They do – but only if it's relevant to their needs. What every customer really wants to know is how you're going to help them. Present enough background and credentials to establish your credibility. Then move quickly to showing how your solution meets their needs and delivers benefits to them.

### Address risk

Whether they admit it or not, all buyers obsess about the downside. Assess the risk that's inherent in the client's decision. Show how your solution will reduce those risks.

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*And don't be afraid to discuss the downside of your recommendation. If you don't bring it up, someone will. Better to raise the issue and address it yourself.*

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### Include plan B

You know you can do the job, but not everyone will be convinced. Provide a clear implementation plan that shows how you'll deal with major obstacles and presents alternatives if things don't go according to plan.

### Head off price objections

Think about how the customer might question the price and present it in a way that puts it in context – for example, by demonstrating life-cycle costs.

### Get your key contact to endorse it

Run a draft past your internal champion or sponsor before you submit the final version.

## Report and proposal writing checklist

<p>1. What is your overall impression of this proposal?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well laid out and attractive or professional</li> <li>• Good use of headings and structured well</li> </ul>	
<p>2. Quick check for basics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Title page with details</li> <li>2. Table of contents</li> <li>3. Appendix to hold bulk technical information</li> <li>4. Headers and footers, page numbers</li> <li>5. Index of tables, illustrations, and Appendix</li> <li>6. Pricing clear and easy to follow.</li> </ol>	
<p>3. Does it list objectives for improvements over and above current service or competitor's solution?</p>	
<p>4. Does it mention your understanding of what is most important to the customer?</p>	
<p>5. How well does it explain the add-ons or options within your product and services that you are offering?</p>	
<p>6. How well does it explain future potential and additional services?</p>	
<p>7. How well does it clearly highlight the advantages and disadvantages of each option or product in a summary?</p>	
<p>8. How well does it help to reduce any perceived risk of changing to or using your solution?</p>	
<p>9. How well does the executive or management summary mention added value and key selling points of your solution?</p>	
<p>10. Does it detail next steps and implementation schedule?</p>	
<p>11. How well does it differentiate your solution? Is this personalised for this proposal or client?</p>	
<p>12. Do the answers to the RFP points address the question clearly and immediately?</p>	

## 6. Big, but not clever

### The not-so-magnificent seven

1. Verbosity
2. Tautology
3. Oxymorons
4. Jargon
5. Vague non-sense
6. Cliché
7. Circumlocution

#### Verbosity

This is the quality or state of being verbose or wordy. It is the use of too many words

- But there is no doubt that pompo-verbosity is a persistent and insidious danger, both to official writers and to others. Here are a few examples: They will have to work with unusually distant time-horizons. (They will have to look unusually far ahead.)
- 'But there is no doubt that pompo-verbosity is a persistent and insidious danger, both to official writers and to others'
- They will have to work with unusually distant time-horizons.
- Another consideration for any language based on second-order polymorphism is the problem of verbosity.

#### Tautology

A tautology is an expression or phrase that says the same thing twice, just in a different way. In most cases, it's best to choose just one way to state your meaning and eliminate the extra words.

- That is totally and completely ridiculous.
- Alice started her presentation with a short summary.
- He is always making predictions about the future.
- I like chocolate, like candy, cakes, pudding, etc.
- In my opinion, I think he is wrong.
- The storm hit at 2 p.m. in the afternoon.

Tautology is very common in business writing. Look for it when you are editing.

- I went there personally.
- It is a very unique situation
- ...detailed analysis
- My first priority is to get the project on track.
- There is a lot of frozen ice on the road.
- I know it's true because I heard it with my own ears.
- She always over-exaggerates.

## Oxymorons

An oxymoron is a **self-contradicting word or group of words**

- 'Small crowd'
- 'Old news'
- 'Open secret'
- 'Only choice'
- 'Pretty ugly'
- 'Awfully good'

## Jargon

Jargon usually means **the specialized language used by people in the same work or profession...** This noun can also refer to language that uses long sentences and hard words. If you say that someone's speech or writing is full of jargon, this means you don't approve of it and think it should be simplified.

- Bang for the buck – a term that means to get the most for your money
- Best practice – the best way to do something
- Core competency – basic strength of a group or company
- Due diligence – putting effort into research before making a business decision
- Drill down – to look at a problem in detail
- Low-hanging fruit – the easiest problems to fix
- Scalable – an endeavour that can be expanded without a lot of additional investment

## Vague non-sense

Being vague doesn't communicate well and it leaves room for misunderstanding or misinterpretation. For example, the statement, '**Everyone is showing up late for meetings**' is vague and probably not accurate.

- We may have a number of possible ways to solve the problem.
- I would like your response in a timely manner.
- ASAP
- In the fullness of time.
- Later in the week.

## Cliché

A cliché is an expression that was once innovative but has lost its novelty due to overuse. Take the phrase '**as red as a rose**' for example—it is a universal descriptor for the colour red that is now commonplace and unoriginal.

Avoid these business cliches like the plague, although this is easier said than done.

- It's a win-win situation – If you say this, no one has won anything.
- Think outside the box – means no new ideas.
- Grab the low-hanging fruit – This one is a no.
- Value-added – What, are we grocery shopping? This one is tiring to hear.
- Let's take this offline – This was creative once upon a time. It's not anymore.

- Take it to the next level – Am I the only one picturing Super Mario Bros?
- I don't have the bandwidth – This one is overused.

## **Circumlocution**

Circumlocutions are roundabout expressions often used to inflate the writer's importance, to conceal the facts, to be in fashion or a bad habit. Avoid the

- unnecessary use of passives,
- unnecessary use of negatives,
- preference for abstract words,
- overuse of stock formulas and verbal traps.

### Examples

- in light of the fact (because)
- in reference to (about)
- with the exception of (except)
- in the event of (if)
- in a timely fashion (quickly)
- notwithstanding the fact that (although)
- on the grounds that (because)
- in view of the fact that (because)

**Exercise A – use a more familiar word**

1 Thank you for your **CORRESPONDENCE**.

.....

2 Please **RECIPROCATE** now.

.....

3 I have enclosed the letter for your **PERUSAL**.

.....

4 He **ANTICIPATES** an answer by the end of the day.

.....

5 **ACQUAINT** me with the details.

.....

**Exercise B – use fewer words**

1 I need the information for the report with the minimum of delay.

.....

2 The report needs to be completed in the near future.

.....

3 The team worked in conjunction with the consultant.

.....

4 In the event that John is too busy to attend the meeting, we shall reschedule it for another day.

.....

5 We should meet with regard to producing the new documentation.

.....

6 Employees who can take efficient minutes are in short supply.

.....

7 I am confident at this point in time that the project will succeed.

**Exercise C – be factual and specific rather than vague**

- 1 As soon as possible .....  
.....
- 2 Reasonable expenses .....  
.....
- 3 In the recent past .....  
.....
- 4 Large amount of money .....  
.....

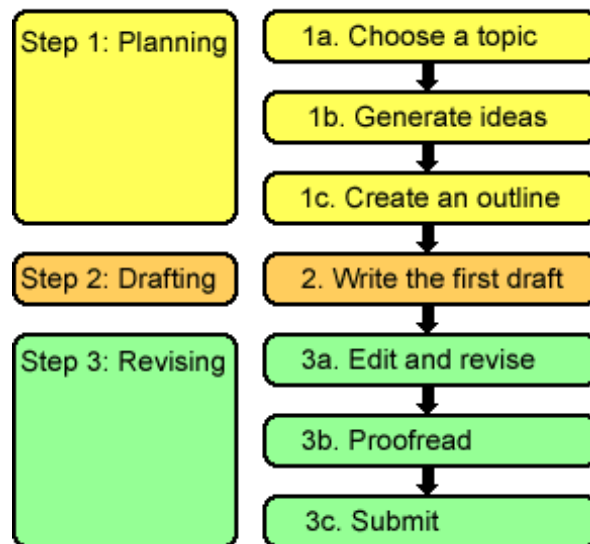
**Exercise D – Focus on more appropriate, everyday phrases**

- 1 Increased customer resistance has been encountered.  
.....
- 2 Owing to unforeseen circumstances...  
.....
- 3 We beg to inform you...  
.....
- 4 I am writing to inform...  
.....
- 5 ...attached herewith.  
.....
- 6 We will advise you in due course.  
.....
- 7 ...your good self.  
.....
- 8 Assuring you of our best attention at all times.  
.....
- 9 We take pleasure in advising you...  
.....

*‘Say all you have to say in the fewest possible words, or your reader will be sure to skip them; and in the plainest possible words or he will certainly misunderstand them’*

– John Ruskin

## 7. Effective editing skills



### Editing example: Sentence Length and Rhythm

Vary the structure and length of your sentences so that the rhythm and pace of your writing does not become monotonous.

#### This example shows a monotonous structure:

The current turnover among customer service reps. who work in the call centre is 60%. The turnover rate for other personnel is 45%. The cost to hire and train one new customer service rep. is £1,200. We now spend £150,000 annually on training new customer service reps. We can reduce this cost by a substantial amount. I am proposing a pilot programme that can help us deal with the problem. This e-mail describes that programme.

#### This example is too compressed:

Since our turnover rate for customer service reps. is 60% compared to 45% for other personnel, and since each new customer service rep. hired costs us £1,200 a year, training these customer service reps. requires our division to spend £150,000 a year, a figure that can be reduced by implementing the pilot programme I propose in this e-mail.

#### This example uses sentences of varying length which results in a pleasing, easy-to-read rhythm:

The turnover rate for customer service reps. is 60% compared to 45% for other workers. Hiring and training a new customer service rep. cost us £1,200 per employee, or £150,000 annually. To reduce this expense, I propose we implement the following pilot programme.

## Rules of effective editing

1. Use words correctly
2. Clear, short, well-structured sentences
3. Active voice and positive
4. Paragraphs to one theme
5. Correct use of bullet points and numbering
6. Proper punctuation

### Language – key points

- Be reader-friendly, rather than pompous and unnatural.
- Write, as you would speak face-to-face.
- Use short words wherever possible.
- Use words with precise meanings and not open to doubt.
- Beware of jargon / technical / professional words.
- Try to keep long words below 10% of the total.

### Sentence length

Sentences should ideally be about twenty words long. More than this and ideas can become clouded. You can keep sentences short by:

- Keeping to one unit of thought per sentence.
- Using active verbs.
- Avoiding unnecessary words or phrases that add nothing to the meaning.

### Sentence structure

#### Active voice

Writing which uses an active voice is clear and direct. The active voice forces us to say exactly what we mean. We must clarify **who took** or **should take** the action. The active leaves the reader with complete understanding and avoids ambiguity and vagueness.

#### Passive voice

Writing which uses the passive avoids being specific, leaves room for manoeuvre and is slower to read and understand.

#### Active voice example

- The cat sat on the mat. Not, the mat was sat on by the cat.

### Paragraphs

Clear paragraphing presents the contents of your message in progressive and readily comprehensible stages. A paragraph is one unit of thought.

## The Clarity Index

Long words and sentences make things more difficult to read. It is possible to measure this by the 'Clarity Index'. The Clarity Index is a tool that was developed by the US Army to encourage personnel to be clearer with their writing.

The Clarity Index is a simple way of checking if you are making things too complicated, or if you are being too abrupt.

It does this by using a combination of the average words per sentence (aim for 15) and the percentage of your total text that are 'long words' (aim for 15%).

The actual calculation is a bit complicated. It can take more than a minute to perform if you do it manually. Online tools can just take a few seconds.

Copy any piece of text – e.g., part of an e-mail or a report, between 180-200 words – and you will see the Clarity Index. Aim for 20-40, with 30 being ideal.

<http://gunning-fog-index.com/>

The Gunning fog index is calculated with the following algorithm.

1. Select a passage (such as one or more full paragraphs) of around 100 words. Do not omit any sentences.
2. Determine the average sentence length. (Divide the number of words by the number of sentences.)
3. Count the 'complex' words consisting of three or more syllables. Do not include proper nouns, familiar jargon, or compound words. Do not include common suffixes (such as -es, -ed, or -ing) as a syllable.
4. Add the average sentence length and the percentage of complex words; and
5. Multiply the result by 0.4.

The complete formula is:

$$0.4 \left[ \left( \frac{\text{words}}{\text{sentences}} \right) + 100 \left( \frac{\text{complex words}}{\text{words}} \right) \right]$$

## Layout and visual design

Always use style sheets and keep to standard fonts, margins, and layout designs.

1. White space: Make liberal use of it.
2. Margins: The overall appearance should look like a picture in a frame. Keep at least one inch all round.
3. Indentations: The fewer indents, the better. Too many will present a scrappy image.
4. Print size: This should be consistent throughout the organisation.
5. Style Shell: Documents should be prepared. Make sure you know all the different font sizes and styles available.
6. Major headings: Labelling and identifying the structure:
7. Minor headings: Signposting the topics.
8. Paragraphs – 3-4 sentences
9. Numbering systems – consistent and clear
10. Consistency: Be consistent.
11. Visual communication: Use tables and diagrams effectively.

### Bullet points

If you have several points to make or questions to ask, it is far easier to lay these out as a series of bullet points. If you choose to use bullet points, make sure the 'stem' or introductory line matches each of the bullet points.

#### **Example 1: The information on our department's intranet site will be:**

- easily understood by all who visit the site
- updated regularly
- partly animated
- appealing to the reader's eye.

#### **Example 2: The company's summer party will include the following:**

- A large bar area.
- Several dining areas.
- Balloon modellers and cartoonists.
- A live band in the main marquee.
- Prizes to be given out by the MD.

#### **Example 3: The department's staff require access to:**

- three large filing cabinets;
- a photocopier;
- two printers;
- departmental in-trays and
- individual pigeon holes.

## 8. Introduction to proofreading

### Tips for effective proofreading

1. Make sure you have a good knowledge of punctuation and grammar.
2. Avoid distractions.
3. It can help if you read the piece aloud.
4. Give yourself frequent breaks, every 20 minutes or so.
5. Be methodical.
6. You need to concentrate on reading one word at a time. Do not rush.
7. Do not rely on proofreading on screen.
8. If you can, get someone else to do a final proofread of important documents.

### How to proofread

The grammar and spell-checker in some software catches only some mistakes. To catch other less obvious errors you need to visually proofread your document.

1. **Read before proofing.**  
Read the entire document through once to get an overall feel for content and layout before you proofread for errors.
2. **Proofread text.**  
Proofread the document checking for punctuation and spelling irregularities (including consistent use of alternate spellings based on any style guide used by the organisation).
3. **Read aloud.**  
Proofread the entire document, including headlines and other text by reading it aloud. If possible, have another person listen and read along while you read aloud. This is a good way to catch missing words or doubled words.
4. **Double-check names.**  
Check spelling of all names and company names.
5. **Double-check numbers.**  
Check all numbers carefully. Call phone numbers to verify. If addition, subtraction, or other math operations appear in text, double-check the figures.
6. **Look for inconsistencies.**  
Check for consistent use of small caps, for abbreviations and acronyms as well as consistent use of italics (for book titles, foreign phrases, etc.).
7. **Proof graphics and captions.**  
Check artwork and ensure that it is placed correctly. Proofread captions and look at artwork to ensure the correct captions are with each photo.
8. **Look at the fonts.**  
Check for changes in fonts within text and consistent font usage for headlines and captions.

**9. Look at spacing.**

Check for consistent spacing between elements such as headlines and body copy or gutters between columns of text.

**10. Look for trapped white space.**

In, justified text especially, look for rivers of white space and awkward hyphenation.

**11. Work from beginning to end.**

When making corrections to text that includes changing line endings (tracking, font size changes, etc.) start at the beginning of the document and work towards the end.

**12. Have a proofreading partner.**

If possible, have another person proofread or assist you when you proofread your own work.

### **Key points for proofing longer documents**

1. Print out your text, especially if it is long. Proofreading from hard copy, you will often notice things you miss on screen.
2. Leave time between editing raw copy and reading the proof. Your assumptions and memories of the sense have time to recede, so interfere less.
3. Read all the 'big stuff' such as titles first. The reader probably will, yet mistakes are easy to overlook when you're distracted by the fine detail in the main text.
4. Read it again, slowly, for detail. If you're not a habitual proof-reader, use a piece of paper to mark the line you're reading (yes, like you did in primary school).
5. When you have marked a correction, read the whole sentence again: after seeing a glaring error, the eye tends to skip over the adjoining words or phrases.
6. Watch out for homophones and homonyms. Even though you're not reading aloud, they are easily confused and overlooked – by the spellchecker as well as you.
7. Look out for typos that are like the intended word but change the meaning, e.g., causal / casual; ingenuous / ingenious; uniformed / uninformed; trial / trail; alternatively / alternately; marital / martial; complaint / compliant.
8. Mark corrections in the margin as well as in the offending word or phrase, especially if you are proofing something that will be passed on to someone else for a final look.
9. If possible, have a colleague give it a final read.

## 9. Grammar rules O.K.

### Grammar rules O.K.
















The Cambridge English Dictionary defines grammar as:

*'The rules about how words change or order themselves when used together'*

### Forget these grammatical myths

- You can start a sentence with and, but, because, so, or, however.
- You can split infinitives. So you can say to boldly go.
- You can end a sentence with a preposition. In fact, it is something we should stand up for.
- And you can use the same word twice in a sentence if you can't find a better word.

Of course, this does not mean you should break these so-called rules all the time – just when they make a sentence flow better.

Mark	What it means	How to use it	The results
	Take it out	Give it <del>it</del> to me.	Give it to me.
	Take it out	Use a picture <del>or</del> school ID.	Use a picture or school ID.
	Close the gap	abo <u>u</u> t	about
	Close the gap	proof <u>r</u> ead	proofread
	Capitalize	Sydney Opera <u>h</u> ouse	Sydney Opera House
	Make lowercase	the <u>P</u> resident's job	the president's job
	Add	"No," she said.	"No," she said.
	Add a letter	acknowledg <u>e</u> ment	acknowledgement
	Add word(s)	When I <u>nod</u> my head	When I nod my head
	Transpose	There <u>is</u> it again.	There it is again.
	Italicize	<u>The Scarlet Letter</u>	<i>The Scarlet Letter</i>
	New paragraph	at night. ¶ The next day,	at night. The next day,
	No new paragraph	sometimes. He threw	sometimes. He threw
	Check spelling	<u>imput</u> <sup>SP</sup>	input
	Spell out	<u>Gen.</u> Black	General Black

## Punctuation

Punctuation is to the written word what intonation is to the spoken. Take ‘Yeah, right.’ How it is said determines what it means. The right punctuation should also serve solely to clarify meaning. A powerful tool, punctuation can even reverse meaning, as in:

‘A woman without her man is nothing.’

‘A woman: without her, man is nothing.’

### The full stop

The most useful punctuation mark: use it liberally. Short sentences are clearer in meaning and easier to read. Particularly in copywriting, full stops are used frequently, while other ‘stops’, such as the semi-colon, are used less. Letter or report writing, by contrast, permit longer sentences, because they don’t require the immediacy of copy writing, but always question the effect of sentence length on clarity.

### The comma

The most overused punctuation mark: use it sparingly. It often becomes the default punctuation of the unconfident writer, but its overuse results in sloppy, ill-defined sentences. Always ask if a full stop is what is really needed. Just as shorter sentences help sharpen your focus, by contrast too many commas can be a give-away to drifting thought. It shouldn’t interrupt the flow of sentences; they are only used to clarify meaning.

- As the chair broke, he fell quickly, heavily, and awkwardly.
- John entered the room with his colleague, and his books in a carrier bag.

### The exclamation mark

This should be used rarely. If you feel the need for one at the end of a sentence to indicate, for example, irony, surprise, or humour, ask yourself first if words could not do the job. Through careful choice of words, good writers very rarely resort to exclamation marks, which are more at home in teenage texts, jokey emails, tabloid headlines and advertising copy.

### The hyphen

This joins two or more words connected in meaning, such as mother-in-law and timewaster. Used adjectivally before the noun, compound adjectives carry a hyphen, e.g., ‘the pick-up truck will come for the goods’, but ‘the truck will come and pick up the goods’. A hyphen can change meaning, as in ‘a cross-section of voters’ and ‘20-odd patients’. Remove it and you have angry voters and mad patients. The trend is towards dropping hyphenation, though more frequently in American English, e.g., makeup, checkout, drivetime.

## The apostrophe

This is the most misused punctuation mark in written English. Its expedient absence now in texts and often emails has further obscured its usage for many people. But the rules are simple:

1. possessives: 'the musician's songs' if there is just one musician; 'the musicians' songs' if there is more than one musician (so the person dictates the apostrophe position, not the object)
2. verbal contractions (I don't like that)
3. plural of letters of the alphabet (there are four s's and two p's in Mississippi)

Don't use it for

- something belonging to 'it'
- plurals

## Ownership

If there is one owner, place an apostrophe after the owner and add s.

My colleague's glasses were next to her manager's book.

(The glasses of my colleague were next to the book of her manager.)

## The dash

This draws the reader's attention to the phrase it precedes so can be useful for emphasis. But it is becoming the ill-disciplined default mark. Consider what punctuation may have traditionally been used or whether a new sentence is needed. For example, 'It's senseless complaining about tuition fees – most other countries have had them for decades' can be better written with a colon or as two sentences. Also, ensure you differentiate a dash from a hyphen (the former being longer).

## The semi-colon

This has been losing currency as sentences have got shorter. But it is still a handy mark, creating a slightly longer pause than a comma and joining two halves of a sentence that are of equal weight, to link two closely related sentences

- to join sentences with a strong contrast
- to separate items in a long, complicated list.

*I will be away tomorrow; I will also be out of the office on Thursday.*

*I thought I saved a thousand pounds; in fact, I'd saved ten.*

*I will need you to produce: a current driving licence; proof of ownership of the property*

## Colons

Colons introduce a list.

I will need the following information: proof of purchase, distributor's name, town where it was bought and address of the recipient.

## Dash

The manager announced his decision – 6% pay rises.

Could you send me the report in question by May 4th?

## But do not overdo it.

Punctuation use has become increasingly minimalist – so often, if in doubt, leave it out. Sometimes, however, it is vital to avoid ambiguity. Punctuation is all that is needed to make sense of the following apparently senseless sentences.

- 1 Residents refuse to go in the bins.
- 2 I've pretty normal pastimes spending many of my spare hours on cooking my family and my dog.
- 3 Watch out man eating apes.
- 4 In my lunch-hour I went to the Coop the bank and Mappin and Webb and the queues in all of them were endless.
- 5 Smokers make more new year resolutions than most do however quitting is hard without help.
- 6 Its a normal looking retail outlet but organised to order merchandise discount and publicise its products simultaneously on social media.
- 7 You will be required to work twenty four hour shifts.

## 10. And finally...

### Writing with style

There are many techniques you can use. Here are seven of my favourites.

1. Alliteration.
2. Aristotle's Triptych and lists of three.
3. AIDA.
4. Puns, songs, and film titles.
5. Quotes and sound bites.
6. Metaphor and examples.
7. 'Power' and sensory-based words.

#### Alliteration

An alliteration is the repetition of letters or sounds that is used for emphasising or stressing importance. They usually happen when words that start with the same sound – not necessarily the same letter- are repeated within the exact phrase or sentence. For example: Rocky Road, Happy Holidays, Weight Watchers Win.

#### Triptych and lists of three

The Aristotelian Triptych is simply this: tell them what you are going to say to them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.

*What's so magical about the number three?*

The number three is pervasive. Some of the most famous quotes throughout history are structured in three parts. It all comes down to the way we humans process information. We have become proficient at pattern recognition by necessity, and three is the smallest number of elements required to create a pattern.

#### AIDA

The acronym AIDA is a handy tool for ensuring that your copy, or other writing, grabs attention.

- Attention (or attract).
- Interest.
- Desire.
- Action.

Using the AIDA model will help you ensure that your writing is clear, compelling, and persuasive. First, it must grab the target audience's attention and engage their interest. Then it must build a desire for the product offering before outlining the action the writer wants the audience to take.

1. Attention can be drawn with a rhetorical question.
2. Interest is often in facts, problems, and statements.
3. Desire is linked to gaining benefits and avoiding consequences.
4. Action is getting you to keep reading or take the next step.

### **Puns, songs, and film titles**

What is a pun? A pun is a sentence that makes a play on words. Puns rely on words that are similar in spelling, sound or meaning to make the reader (or listener) smile, laugh or groan. Weaving song, film or TV titles into your text has a similar effect. They make good headings as they will catch the eye and get attention.

- 'Now is the winter of our discontent

### **Quotes and sound bites**

A sound bite is a short phrase or sentence that captures the nub of what you are trying to say. 'This is not the time for simple soundbites, the hand of history is on our shoulders.'

Or sound bites are a few pithy words that capture the essence of your message. Crafted correctly, sound bites are memorable and often become quotations.

A quote is a relevant saying by a notable person.

### **Metaphor**

---

*A metaphor is a technique writers use to make their writing more evocative.*

---

Metaphors often get confused with similes. Whereas a metaphor makes a declarative statement that one thing is another thing, a simile uses words like 'as' or 'like' to compare two similar things.

- Let's get a grip on this situation.
- He has strong opinions on this topic.
- It left a sour taste.

### **Power and sensory-based words**

Power words can trigger a psychological or emotional response. They're called 'power words' because they are so persuasive that people can't resist being influenced by them. For example: New, free, lose, because, you, imagine, different, interesting, instant, easy, proven, how to, even more, reduced.

### **Sensory and power words. Show, don't tell.**

Sensory words are descriptive. They describe how we experience events and emotions.

That is, how we smell, see, hear, feel, or taste something. For example, using words related to sight that indicate colours, shape, or appearance: gloomy, dazzling, bright, foggy, gigantic. You can do the same for hearing, feeling, taste and smell.