

Golden rules of writing well



By Gillian Christie

Gillian Christie is a freelance editor and proofreader. Email: gchristie@xtra.co.nz.

Having a break from the document allows you to read it with a perspective that is closer to your reader's

In the March 2008 *Journal* (p 62) I covered the first three stages in report preparation:

1. think/plan
2. research
3. structure/sort.

Then in April (p 68) I discussed the division of the report into sections and the information that might go in each section. This month covers the last two steps.

4. Write

Stage 4 is actually writing the report. The sorting or structuring stage will have given you a skeleton or framework for your report, so you will know what points are to be covered in each section. So the writing is really a “fleshing-out” process – turning your lists of points into proper sentences and paragraphs.

In the structuring stage you sorted out the overall order of information for your report. Now, as you write each section, you need to ensure that the points within each section also flow logically and smoothly. It's probably easiest to start with your introduction/purpose and write in the same order as your reader will read – obviously any summary would be done last.

However, you may prefer to work backwards, starting with your recommendation. If you do this you'll need to check extra carefully that your report does make sense when read from the top down!

Writing style

Reports can easily become dry documents that are boring to read. Often that happens because writers focus all their attention on the information and forget about the way it's presented. So reports can end up with a lot of jargon and technical terms, long sentences and an overuse of the passive voice. It's common to read anonymous sentences such as:

- *It is recommended that...*
- *It was found that...*
- *The results were analysed...*

In my July 2006 *Journal* column (p 72) I discussed the active voice: using the pattern “who did what” for the majority of your sentences. In a report, the active voice creates a livelier style that is much more interesting for your reader. Realistically, if your name is on the report header and the reader knows that you did the research and writing, there's no point in trying to remain anonymous by using the passive voice. So take responsibility for your actions and thoughts: *I found that... I analysed the results... I recommend that...* Of course, if you are writing to represent the work and decisions of a team, you'd use the word “we” rather than “I”.

Always keep your reader in mind. Remember that they are likely to be busy, so don't make them wade through long, wordy sentences or wonder about the meaning of technical or complex terminology. Avoid or explain jargon if necessary – and remember that even people within your own organisation may not know all the jargon used in your field of expertise.

Bullet points are an excellent way to chop up



long sentences, and they also make it easier for your reader to see the points.

Also consider whether some information could be presented in a table or graph (bar, pie, etc). This will help your reader quickly and easily interpret figures such as statistics or costings. If you do this, refer to the table/graph in the text, perhaps mentioning a couple of key points, but don't repeat all the information.

5. Revise

This applies to any document you've written – you must check it before it goes to the intended audience. Often it can be hard to spot errors or inconsistencies in a document you've written because you can get too close to it – you end up reading what you thought you wrote rather than what you actually wrote. That's why revision is

always more effective if you can leave the document for a while – preferably overnight or a few days – before reading it again. Having a break from the document allows you to read it with a "fresh eye" and a perspective that is closer to your reader's. If possible, and especially if it's a really important or sensitive document, ask a colleague to read it and provide feedback.

When you review your report, check that the layout is professional, uncluttered and enhances the information you are presenting. Most organisations have report templates that do this job for you. Make sure that your heading "hierarchy" is clear and any numbering system is logical.


Troublesome words

Only – this is called a "determiner" – which means it indicates or determines

what is being referred to. Generally it is placed immediately before the word or phrase it applies to – which means that shifting its placement may change the meaning of your sentence. For example:

- *Only he prepares tax returns* (no one else prepares tax returns).
- *He only prepares tax returns* (he doesn't do anything else with the tax returns).
- *He prepares only tax returns* (he doesn't prepare anything else).

In speech the rule is not so rigid because we can use tone, pausing and inflection to indicate what "only" refers to. But for clarity in writing, aim to put "only" in front of its target word or phrase.

Please feel free to email me with suggestions of any troublesome words you'd like me to explain. 

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