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EDITION**

How to Write

**Communicating
Ideas and Information**

**Herbert E. Meyer
Jill M. Meyer**

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How to Write

Communicating Ideas and Information

Herbert and Jill Meyer

**Storm King Press
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Ready, Set, Go

For Tom and Anna

INTRODUCTION

We are in the midst of a writing revolution. The combination of today's computers and the word processing software they run has virtually eliminated the physical drudgery of creating text. It is easier now than ever before to type, to insert, to delete, to cut-and-paste, to edit, and to format text. And today's telecommunications technology has accelerated the distribution of written material. We can send notes, letters, memos, reports and articles around the world literally at the speed of light. We have fax machines in our offices, in our homes, even in our cars. With electronic mail systems and electronic bulletin boards we can post messages to our colleagues, our friends and to people anywhere on earth we have never met but who share common interests with us.

The result of this revolution is an exponential increase—an explosion, really—in the total volume of new text being created. Today more people are communicating more ideas, and more information, than ever before in history. The average person absorbs more information in a year than his or her grandfather would have absorbed in his entire life. And the torrent of information pouring over us today is but a trickle compared to what lies ahead in years to come.

All this has intensified the competition for each reader's time and attention. Because there is so much to read, and too little time in which to read all of it, readers are being forced to become more selective. First, they make instant decisions about about what to read from the unending flow that reaches them; which pieces of writing to focus on and which to ignore. Second, after choosing which pieces of writing to read, they spend less time with each piece than they would like to spend with it were they not so busy.

This means that the ability to write well—to communicate your ideas and your information clearly and concisely—no longer is merely desirable. It is critical. When lack of time forces readers to choose, they tend to reject those pieces of writing that at first glance appear to be wordy, poorly thought out, badly organized, generally difficult to understand. And even for those pieces that survive this first cut, the reader's time and attention are limited.

A piece of writing gets one shot. If the reader cannot easily and quickly figure out whatever the writer is trying to say, that piece of writing gets set aside *regardless of the knowledge that may lie within it*—then buried forever in the unending flow of new information. No longer can a writer count on his or her reader taking sufficient time to read, then digest the piece; to sit quietly, to think about it, perhaps to re-read some or all of it, in short to devote the intellectual effort required to discern what the writer is driving at. If the reader doesn't get the writer's point—and get it fast—the reader moves on to the next piece in the pile.

As yet there is no hardware or software product capable of producing clear and concise writing. There may never be such a product. For this is fundamentally a “wetware” task, which means the work must be done inside the writer's brain. More than ever before, a writer must help his or her reader by making that reader's job easier—by writing so clearly, and so concisely, that with the least possible effort the reader can understand whatever the writer is trying to say.

How to Write is designed to improve your “wetware”. It will do this by teaching you the skills and techniques of communicating ideas and information clearly and

concisely. In this New Edition we have preserved the format of the original book, and of course much of its content. But we have updated examples as appropriate, and generally made whatever changes we deemed useful now that just about everyone who writes does so on a computer.

By reading our book you will, so to speak, install the *How to Write* program onto your “wet drive”—your brain—so that when you sit down to write you can boot up the intellectual skills and techniques of communicating ideas and information. By doing so you will be able to make the best possible use of the remarkable hardware and software now available, and of the even more remarkable hardware and software that scientists and technicians are dreaming of and creating for us right now.

How to Use This Book

Let's begin by setting aside a myth: that the way to write is to sit for hours on end at a desk or kitchen table, staring at a blank computer screen and waiting patiently—sometimes desperately—for inspiration to strike.

Nonsense. In real life it never happens this way. Never. Not even for the best and most successful professional writers. It only looks this way because the key decisions a writer needs to make, and the steps that he or she then must take to turn these decisions into words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, and so forth, are invisible to people who haven't been shown what these decisions are and how to take the various steps that follow.

In fact, writing is less of an art than a process. And like any process, this one involves a series of decisions and steps that, when done in the correct order and with reasonable attention to detail, just about guarantee a decent and acceptable result. Happily, it isn't very difficult to make these key decisions and steps that the writing process requires. And neither is it all that hard to take the steps that turn these decisions into polished, finished prose.

The trick to writing lies in knowing what these decisions are, recognizing just what steps these decisions will require you to take next, and mastering the techniques and procedures to do it all efficiently.

This handbook is designed to help you write by showing you first, the key decisions and steps all writers need to make and, second, the skills and techniques that will turn these decisions and steps into finished, polished prose. In other words, this handbook is designed to show you how to write. For regardless of what language you speak, and regardless of what it is you are writing—a report, a letter, a memo, an essay, a book, or whatever—the writing process is always the same. Without a grasp of this process, you will have trouble writing anything, in any language; with a grasp of this process, you will be able to write anything you need or want to write, in whatever language you speak. This handbook is designed for everyone who needs or wants to write, including business executives, lawyers, doctors, administrators, managers, scientists, engineers, technicians, and students at all levels. It is designed to help those of you who become paralyzed by the very thought of writing, those of you who write easily but are unable to focus what you write so that your readers can grasp your point, and those of you who struggle along every time out, wondering why what ought to be a simple writing job always drains so much time and energy.

Like the writing process itself, this book is divided into three parts:

- Organizing for the Job
- Turning Out a Draft
- Polishing the Product

It doesn't matter what you are writing. You always work your way through all three parts, and you always do it in the same order. Of course, if you're writing something short and simple like a thank-you note for a birthday gift, you won't need to spend a lot of time organizing for the job. However, you will likely need spend much if not most of your time looking for just the right words to express your gratitude, which is to say turning out a first draft and then polishing the product. On the other hand,

should you be writing, say, a history of World War I, organizing for the job could take years. Indeed, it could take longer to organize—that is, to do your research—than to turn out a draft and then polish the product.

Moreover, different writers have different strengths and weaknesses. Some people are especially good organizers; their problem is turning what they've organized into whole sentences and paragraphs that capture what they have learned. Other people organize badly but write well; when these people sit down to turn out a first draft, the words flow smoothly but they find they just can't focus their thoughts in a way that makes these thoughts comprehensible to anyone else. And still others always manage to turn out so-so drafts, but can't figure out how to complete the job. So different writers need to spend different percentages of their time and effort on the three parts of the writing process. The point to keep in mind is that whatever your writing project—and whatever your personal strengths and weaknesses—you will need to perform all three parts, in the correct order, to write efficiently and effectively.

Part One of *How to Write* will show you how to organize for virtually any writing project. Part Two will show how to turn the material you have organized into a first draft. And Part Three will show how to turn that draft into a polished, ready-to-go piece of writing.

To use this book effectively, read it through once from cover to cover. This will take about an hour. You don't need to memorize anything at all. Your goal is to become familiar with the three parts, and the key steps within each part, that all together comprise the process of writing. You want to begin thinking about writing not as a mystical art form that depends utterly on born talent or inspiration, but rather as a series of decisions, steps, and techniques that you can master and whose final result will be the clear, successful product you want.

Your real use of *How to Write* will come when you need to begin an actual project. Remember, this is a handbook. So keep it handy. Use it to guide yourself from start to finish through your own project. When you begin an actual project, read through Part One again and apply its decisions, steps, and techniques to whatever you are writing. Only when you feel that you have successfully organized for the job at hand should you go on to Part Two. Likewise, only when you have turned out an acceptable first draft, based on the decisions, steps, and techniques outlined in Part Two of *How to Write*, should you go on to Part Three.

Again, keep in mind that writing is a process. As with any process, when you are just getting started its various decisions, steps and techniques always appear to be more difficult and complicated than they really are. And, as with any process, you can be sure that this one will become much easier with experience. Eventually the various decisions, steps and techniques will become second nature. So don't become discouraged if at first it all seems a bit difficult and complicated. After a while it will all become natural—well, almost natural—and writing itself will be much, much easier than you ever imagined it could be.

PART ONE

**Organizing
for the Job**

Knowing how to organize for the job—for any job—is what separates the amateurs from the professionals. That’s because organizing for a job is the least visible part of any process, and therefore the one that most amateurs don’t know and, all too often, are not even aware exists. It’s the part of a process that, when learned, usually leaves an amateur shaking his or her head ruefully while saying something like, “Oh, so that’s how they do it.”

On the other hand, a professional understands not only the need to organize properly for whatever job he or she plans to do, but also how to organize for that job. It makes no difference what the job is; you have to organize for it if you are going to do it properly. For instance, if you’re going to paint a room you don’t just run out to a hardware store, buy a brush and a bucket of paint, then run back home and start slapping the stuff on your walls. First you take down whatever pictures and curtains may be hanging, move your furniture to the center of the room, cover it up, and perhaps put masking tape around the window edges to keep paint from getting onto the glass. All this is organizing for the job, and if you have ever painted a room without organizing properly you know what a mess it can turn out to be. Likewise with baking a cake or bathing a baby; either you organize properly or you stumble your way through the process, wasting time and energy all the while and somehow never quite winding up how and where you want to be.

When you set out to write something—anything—organizing for the job is as every bit as crucial as it is for any other process. Moreover, for reasons we simply cannot understand this part of the writing process generally receives the least amount of attention in schools and in writing textbooks. Some schools and textbooks don’t teach organizing-for-the-job-of-writing at all. So don’t be worried or upset if what follows in this section of *How to Write* seems new and, at first, a bit odd. You’ll master it quickly enough because it’s really not that hard. In fact, it isn’t hard at all. And when you have mastered the techniques of organizing-for-the-job-of-writing, don’t be surprised to find yourself shaking your head ruefully and saying, “Oh, so that’s how they do it.”

As you will see in the steps that follow, organizing-for-the-job is primarily a thinking, list-making, and gathering-up process, during which you will need to:

1. *Choose your category,*
2. *Pick your points,*
3. *Collect your details.*

STEP ONE—Choosing Your Category:

The first step you need to take when you launch a writing project is so basic, and so obvious, that most people don't even realize that this step needs to be taken: You have to decide what it is you are going to write.

After all, every single piece of writing ever written fits into one or another category. There are literally dozens of categories, most of which you are already familiar with even though you may never actually have thought about it. For instance, there are press releases, articles for professional or trade journals, essays, books reviews, newspaper articles, advertisements, sales proposals, sales brochures, progress reports, reports of meetings, memos, letters of complaint, poems, novels, history textbooks, and so forth. To cite one rather obvious example, the item you are looking at this very moment is a "how-to" book, which is itself a very special and distinct category of writing.

It is important to recognize that all pieces of writing fit into one or another category, because each category has its own requirements, its own format, in short its own unique "look". Read through any ten sales proposals, and you will discover that no matter how different they are—no matter how different the products or services they are trying to sell—the similarities among the ten proposals are more striking than the differences. Each will refer to a product or service, each will articulate the advantages of this product or service to the proposed customer, and each will provide some basic information about the product or service such as cost, size, and so forth. Likewise, all book reviews—no matter what the book being reviewed, no matter what language the review is written in—provide the book's title, author, and publisher. All describe the book under review, and all give some idea of the reviewer's opinion.

By deciding what you are going to write, you begin to focus on the requirements and format of your finished product. In a sense, it's like deciding what kind of a house you want to build; it makes it possible to think about the specific materials you're going to need—bricks, lumber, concrete, and so forth—and then about the design, so that in the end you get the finished product you want.

Sometimes the decision of what category of product to write is made for you. For instance, you might be enrolled in a course on American history when your instructor says: "Read up on the Civil War and prepare a paper on the war's two chief causes." Obviously, you will be writing a history report. If your favorite uncle has just sent you a birthday present and your mother hands you a pen and a piece of paper and tells you to sit down to express your appreciation, it's obvious that the item you will be writing is a thank-you note. Or, if you are an engineer with a California-based construction company whose boss asks you to fly to Chicago to see how the new shopping center is coming along, it is clear that what's wanted is a progress report.

But sometimes you will need to think through and make this first decision yourself. What if you buy a new television set, find it doesn't work properly, get no help from the store where you made the purchase, and decide to turn to the manufacturer for satisfaction? It only takes a minute's thought to realize that what you need to write is a letter of complaint. Sometimes it takes a little more thinking. Let's say you work at a small college, as executive assistant to the president. One day your boss calls you in

and says that while watching the news on television the previous evening he saw an interesting feature about the ongoing revolution in telecommunications and how it will change the way research is conducted. He assigns you to look into this issue and to report back, in writing. When you've had a chance to get back to your own office and think for a moment, you realize that what you will need to write is a trend report.

As you can see, deciding what to write is not especially hard to do. It requires merely that you think ahead a little bit to consider the objective of whatever it is you will write. Is your objective to report, to inform, to suggest, to persuade, to stimulate action of one kind or another? What kind of writing product will best achieve this objective? You will be surprised at how easy it is to answer this last question, because in each case there is really only one category that will fit the bill. Determine your objective—that is, figure out the point of the exercise itself—and the correct category of writing product will fairly leap out at you.

Once you know just what sort of product you are going to write—either because someone has told you or because you made the decision yourself based on your judgment of what's needed—you are ready to take the second step: picking the points that will serve as the building blocks for your project.

STEP TWO—Picking Your Points:

Information is what makes a piece of writing go. After all, the purpose of writing something is to convey information. So it follows that information is the basic component of whatever you write. Indeed, information is to any piece of writing what cells are to a living creature, or what bricks and lumber are to a building. It is what gives a piece of writing its shape, its thrust, its very character. Any piece of writing that includes all the necessary information in a sensible, comprehensible form will succeed, no matter what may be its other drawbacks or faults. Likewise, any piece of writing will fail that does not include the necessary information, no matter how eloquent its style and attractive its packaging. Always remember that when all is said and done, whatever you write will rise or fall on whether or not you have conveyed the information your reader needs.

In writing, information is divided into two parts: the point and the detail. A point is a piece of information that needs to be provided to a reader. A detail is the actual substance of that point. For example, in a book review you obviously need to tell your reader who wrote the book that you are reviewing. So that is a point you need to convey. The author's actual name is the detail. Or if you're writing a newspaper ad to sell your car, one point you will need to provide is the mileage; the actual number is the detail. Consider that letter of complaint to the manufacturer of the television set that you recently bought and are unhappy with. Point: why you are unhappy. Detail: the remote control gadget doesn't work.

In Step Two, your objective is merely to make a list of the points of information you are going to need for your piece of writing. Don't worry about collecting the details for these points; that's what you will do in Step Three. For the moment, you need concentrate only on picking the points you are going to need.

The key to making a list of these necessary points lies in the category of product that you are writing. That is because each category has its own information requirements—its own list of points that must be included no matter what additional information you also may include. To illustrate this we have selected the category of "meeting report," which is something nearly everyone needs to write at one time or another. This example includes all the key points for this category, which we will outline afterward:

Report to: the Chairman

From: Vice President for Planning

Subject: Meeting of the Strategic Planning Committee

At this morning's meeting of the strategic planning committee, we decided to accelerate our growth for this year. More precisely, we decided to build not only the two factories in California we had already planned to build, but also to build a factory in Singapore.

Our decision to build this additional factory is based on your suggestion of last week that we give serious thought to a Singapore factory now, in light of our unexpected need to increase production to meet new orders, combined with the Government of Singapore's attractive financial offer made to you during your visit last month to that island country. We estimate that the new factory will cost \$3 million, and that construction could begin as early as April. If so, we believe production at this plant could begin no later than January of the following year.

At our meeting, we decided to seek bids from several construction firms, and to check with our company's major bankers to learn what sort of financial package they might offer us. We expect preliminary responses from both the construction firms and the banks sometime next month.

Our decision to accelerate growth was not unanimous. Of our committee's five members—the vice presidents for planning, production, marketing, finance, and research—only three of us were originally in favor of the acceleration—planning, production, and marketing. The vice president for finance argued that construction of a factory in Singapore, now, would be too expensive; he felt the cost would diminish next year as the inflation rate falls. The vice president for research agreed with this, and added that in his judgment new production machinery would be available two years from now that would enable us to manufacture the same products at a lower cost; hence his conclusion that we would be wise to sit tight for the present.

After some discussion, the vice president for research withdrew his objection to the Singapore plant. Those of us who favored the project convinced him that the market for our product is so huge—now—that it would be a mistake to wait for two years for more efficient equipment; by that time one of our competitors would have taken our customers.

The vice president for finance continues to oppose the project.

We plan to meet again next month here at headquarters to review the situation and to assess our position.

Now, here's a breakdown of this report that lists its points. You can see how each one is absolutely necessary. (Although for the moment you need focus only on the points, for clarity's sake we have included the details, which are in italics):

1. The intended recipient (*the Chairman*).
2. The author (*Vice President for Planning*).
3. The subject (*Meeting of the Strategic Planning Committee*).
4. The key decision reached (*"to accelerate our growth for this year by building a factory in Singapore"*).

5. The basis for this decision (*“your suggestion of last week . . . in light of our unexpected need to increase production . . . combined with the Government of Singapore’s attractive offer . . .”*)

6. Relevant information about the decision:

1. an estimate of the factory’s cost (*“\$3 million”*)
2. an estimate of when construction could begin (*“as early as April”*).
3. an estimate of when production might start (*“no later than January of the following year”*).
4. the next steps to be taken (*“we decided to seek bids from several construction firms, and to check with our company’s major bankers . . .”*)
5. the likely timetable (*“We expect preliminary responses . . . sometime next month”*).
6. a report of differing opinions among those attending the meeting (*“Our decision to accelerate our growth was not unanimous . . .”*).
7. a report of how these differing opinions were resolved (*“The vice president for research withdrew his objection. . . .The vice president for finance continues to oppose the project”*).

7. A sense of what to expect next (*“We plan to meet again next month . . . to review the situation and assess our position”*).

In retrospect, it seems obvious that these points needed to be included—not merely in this report about this meeting, but in any report of any meeting. After all, the purpose of writing such a report is to let a reader know what went on, and only by providing these points can that be done. Could additional points have been provided? Of course. There is no limit to the number of points that could be provided, at least in theory. But the points that this report provides are the absolute minimum necessary to let a reader know what happened at a meeting which that reader did not attend. Obviously, no two meetings are the same. So of course the actual details will vary to reflect the unique substance and tone of each meeting. But the required points will always be the same in any report of any meeting.

To begin picking your points, first get your hands on a few examples of writing in the category you are working in. This is never hard to do, and it is always worth the effort. If you are writing a book review, collect a few reviews that others have written—it doesn’t matter what book—and read them through. If you’re placing an ad in a newspaper to sell your car, browse through a few newspapers to get a feel for what used-car ads look like and read like. You will be surprised at how easily you will be able to separate good examples from bad examples; how quickly you will reject examples that don’t include points you know should be there, how easily you will be drawn toward examples precisely because they include the points that you—as a reader—feel a need to know.

Now, go into whatever word processing program you like and start writing out the specific points you’re going to need to produce your own piece of writing. Take your

time; it's better to draw up a list that is too long rather than one that's too short because you left out some crucial points. And don't hesitate to include points whose details you don't as yet know; you can always get the details you need later, and indeed that's just what you will do. For now, just be sure that the list you make includes all the points you believe your reader or readers will need or want to know.

Quite a few professional writers use an imaginary question-and-answer technique to help zero in on the points their readers will need or want to know. It is a technique that at first will seem awkward and artificial, but one that after a while will become almost second nature. Here's the way to do it: Just for a moment, forget about the idea of writing anything at all. Imagine that you are sitting with the person who is the intended reader of whatever you are going to write. The two of you are having a conversation—not about just anything, but about the subject you are going to write about. Your imaginary reader asks questions; you answer them. Sometimes you know the answers; sometimes you don't. And as you run through this conversation in your mind, all the points that you will need to produce your piece of writing will start to emerge.

To illustrate this technique, let's return to that trend report we cooked up a few pages back; where the college president asks you, his executive assistant, to look into the telecommunications revolution and its impact on research. The imaginary conversation would go something like this:

"I hope you're not too upset that I asked you to write this trend report."

"The truth is, I've never actually done one before, and I'm not quite certain how to begin."

"Look at it from my point of view. The first thing I need to know is—what exactly is going on out there."

"That's easy. It's just as you said when we talked in your office. A telecommunications revolution is under way, which means that people are using their computers in new ways to access information through telephone lines."

"Well, fine. Now you've defined the trend, and that's quite helpful to me. But when I learn that there is a new trend taking place, I can't help but wonder why it's taking place. There's always a reason."

"I know that, too. It's happening because today's technologies make it possible to combine computers and communications in new ways. And this brings down the cost of accessing information electronically."

"Excellent. But you see, each time you come forward with an interesting point it raises yet another question. Now I'm wondering how this trend is happening."

"How it's happening?"

"Of course. What I mean is, I need some details about just what it is that people can do today that was impossible yesterday. In other words, I need to really see how things are being done now, as part of this trend."

"But I don't know that."

"I don't expect you to know it. But I do expect you to find out and include your answer. That's not unreasonable, is it?"

"I suppose not. Would that be all you need?"

"You are my eyes and ears on this thing. I'm looking to you to tell me where the trend is going—what the future holds."

“I’m embarrassed to say this, but again I don’t know.”

“And again, I say that I don’t expect you to know. I expect you to find out and to tell me.”

“Okay. I’ll get going on these points. But is there anything else you’re looking for in this trend report?”

“Yes. Just one more thing. I’d like your own personal judgment about the trend. What do you think about it? Is it a good trend? A bad one? Is it important? Do you see what I’m driving at?”

“Yes. I think so. You want to know what the trend is, why it’s happening, how it’s happening, where it’s going, and what I think of it all. These are the points you need me to cover. Have I got it all now?”

“Oh, yes. Indeed you do.”

Relax. Enjoy yourself. If you don’t like the way you handled yourself during the imaginary conversation—do it again. And this time go a bit more slowly. Think through your answers; experiment with them a bit. Don’t be embarrassed; this is all happening in your mind, and no one except you will ever know about it. Haven’t you ever wished for a second chance to say all the clever and witty things you didn’t say when you should have? Well, now’s your chance. After all, you get to make up the questions as well as the answers, so do it your way. Play around with your words and your ideas until you begin to feel you’ve got a grip on things.

And never, never lose sight of what you started out to do. Namely, to make a list of those points you will absolutely, positively need to satisfy the requirements of the particular category into which your piece of writing falls; the points that you, as a reader, would need or want to know if someone else were writing this piece for you.

Since this step requires more thinking than actual writing, there is no need to remain glued to your chair. Quite a few professional writers spend a hefty chunk of their time walking round, jogging, grocery shopping, washing their cars, or whatever. As long as you are not actually putting words on your computer screen, you can do anything you want so long as you are able to think at the same time. Indeed, sometimes it helps a lot to get away from the table or desk. No one who reads your finished product will have the slightest idea how you spent your time during its production. No one will care, either. Keep in mind that “writing” is a step-by-step process, in which quite a few of the steps require no actual writing at all.

In any case, however you choose to do it you must eventually turn out a list of the various points you are going to need. The list should be simple, direct, and brief enough to fit easily on one screen. Once again using our trend report as an example, a list of points would look like this:

Trend Report

1. *What the trend is*
2. *Why the trend is taking place*
3. *How the trend is happening*
4. *Where the trend is going*
5. *What I (the writer) think of it all*