

**MANAGETM
YOUR
WRITING**

Version 3.0

by [Kenneth W. Davis](#)

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Introduction

***Manage Your Writing* is a guide to a more effective, and efficient, business writing process.**

This guide consists of thirteen chapters, covering twelve steps in the writing process. Each of these twelve steps can be thought of as taking five minutes in a typical one-hour writing job. Therefore, they are numbered from 12 to 1, like the numbers on the face of a clock.

The twelve steps in the writing process are grouped into five stages:

Manage

- [12. Manage Your Writing](#)

Plan

- [1. Find the “We”](#)
- [2. Make Holes, Not Drills](#)
- [3. Get Your Stuff Together](#)
- [4. Get Your Ducks in a Row](#)

Draft

- [5. Do It Wrong the First Time](#)

Break

- [6. Take a Break and Change Hats](#)

Revise

- [7. Signal Your Turns](#)
- [8. Say What You Mean](#)
- [9. Pay by the Word](#)
- [10. Translate into English](#)
- [11. Finish the Job](#)

Manage (again)

- [12. Manage Your Writing \(again\)](#)

You may go directly to any chapter. But if you wish to read this book in order, please start with the first chapter, Chapter 12. (Why Chapter 12? Because, remember, we're working our way around a clock face.)

Chapter 12: Manage Your Writing

Take Charge of Your Writing Process

In a cartoon I saw once, a Hollywood producer summons his secretary. “I want to send a memo to the parking-lot attendant,” he bellows. “Get me a couple of writers.”

I sympathize. Writing is not often easy or fun, and those of us in business are usually too busy to give it the *time* it seems to demand. We’d all like to have staff writers on call, to handle those difficult letters and memos that seem to pile up.

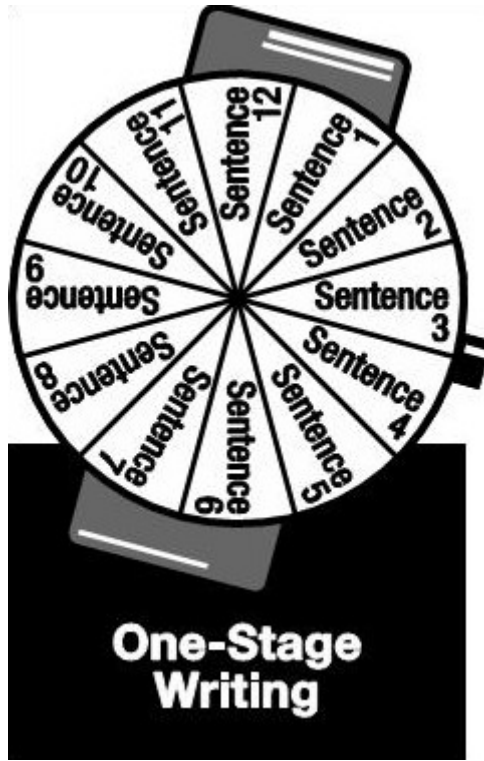
Most of us, however—even in large organizations—have to be our own “writing department.” **We have to take personal responsibility for the stream of writing tasks that cross our desks.**

That’s probably as it should be. As entrepreneur Richard Saul Wurman, president of Access Press, says, “You shortchange yourself if you think that writing is ‘someone else’s problem.’ . . . Even if your job description says nothing about writing, by regarding yourself as a writer, even privately, you can take advantage of the discipline of the craft.”

What probably keeps most of us from regarding ourselves as writers is the belief that the ability to write well is a talent, or a gift. For some, it surely is: the great novelist, poet, or playwright is doubtless born as much as made. But

the everyday business writing that you and I do—the writing that gets the world’s work done—requires no special gift. **It can be *managed*, like any other business process.**

Managing writing is largely a matter of managing *time*. Writing is a *process*, and like any process it can be done efficiently or inefficiently. Unfortunately, most of us have a pretty inefficient writing process. That’s because we try to get each word, each sentence, right the first time. Given a letter to write, we begin with the first sentence, thinking about what to write, writing it, revising it, even checking its spelling, before going on to the second sentence. In an hour of writing, we might spend 45 or 50 minutes doing this kind of detailed drafting, with only a few minutes of overall planning at the beginning and only a few minutes of overall revising at the end.

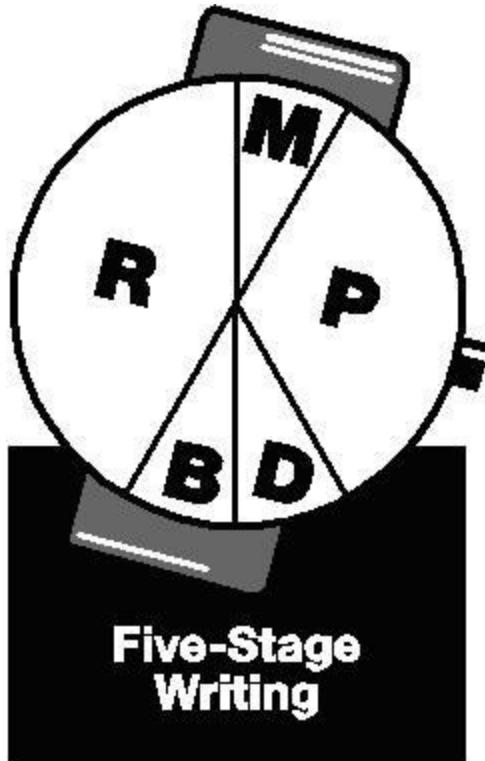


That’s like building a house by starting with the front door: planning, building, finishing it—even washing the window in it—before doing anything with the rest of the house. No wonder most of us have so much trouble writing.

Efficient, effective writers take better charge of their writing time; they *manage* their writing. Like building contractors, they spend time planning before they start construction, and once they’re into construction, they don’t try to do all the finishing touches as they go.

Many good writers break their writing process into three main stages—planning, drafting, and revising—with more time spent at the first and third stages than

at the second. They also build in some “management” time at the beginning and the end, and some break time in the middle. To manage *your* writing time, try the following steps:



At the **managing** stage (perhaps 2 or 3 minutes for a one-hour writing job), remind yourself that writing *can* be managed, and that it’s largely a matter of managing time. Plan your next hour.

At the **planning** stage (perhaps 20 minutes out of the hour),

- [1. Find the “we.”](#) Define the community to which you and your reader belong. Decide how you are

alike and different in knowledge, attitude, and situation.

- [2. Make holes, not drills](#)—as a consultant once told Stanley Tool executives. That is, focus on the outcome you want, not on the means you will use to achieve it. Define your purpose.
- [3. Get your stuff together](#). Collect the information you'll use in your writing.
- [4. Get your ducks in a row](#). Organize your information, so that you can give it to your reader in the most useful order.

At the **drafting** stage (perhaps 5 minutes out of the hour),

- [5. Do it wrong the first time](#). Do a “quick and dirty” draft, without editing.

At the **break** stage (perhaps 5 minutes),

- [6. Take a break and change hats](#). Get away from your draft, even if for only a few minutes, and come back with a fresh perspective—the reader's perspective.

At the **revising** stage (perhaps 25 minutes),

- [7. Signal your turns](#). Just as if you were driving a car, you're leading your reader through new territory. Use “turn signals” to guide your reader from sentence to sentence.
- [8. Say what you mean](#). Put the point of your sentences in the subjects and verbs.
- [9. Pay by the word](#). Make your sentences economical.
- [10. Translate into English](#). Keep your words simple. (Lee Iacocca put both these tips in one

“commandment of good management”: “Say it in English and keep it short.”)

- [11. Finish the job.](#) Check your spelling, punctuation, and mechanics.

Finally, at the **managing** stage again (2 to 3 minutes),

- [12. Manage your writing.](#) Evaluate the process you’ve just finished. Figure out how to improve it next time.

So begin today to *manage* your writing. As United Technologies Corporation said in a *Wall Street Journal* ad, “If you want to manage somebody, manage yourself. Do that well and you’ll be ready to stop managing and start leading.”

Chapter 1: Find the “We”

Define Your Community—Writer and Reader(s)

Most of us in business have heard the advice to make our communication not “I”-centered but “you”-centered. Business communication textbooks tell us to focus not on the sender but on the receiver. They tell us to write not “I will send you a check” but “You will receive a check.”

That advice is good. But it’s not good enough. It ignores the fact that we in business are never isolated writers or speakers communicating with isolated readers or listeners. We communicate within organizations-ideally, within communities. After all, the words *communication* and *community* both come from the same Indo-European roots (*ko* and *mei*, meaning “together” and “change”) (We named our company, Komei, Inc., after this fact.) As Peter Drucker says in his classic book, *Management*, “There can be no communication if it is conceived as going from the ‘I’ to the ‘Thou.’ Communication works only from one member of ‘us’ to another.”

So the best business communication is not just “I”-centered or “you”-centered. It is “we”-centered. To make our letters, memos, and presentations more “we”-centered, we can ask two questions.

The first question is “To what community do my audience and I both belong?” Are we members of the same department? Are we fellow shareholders of the same company? Are we members of the same profession? In short, what makes us “us”?

Try to find the smallest meaningful community that answers this question. The newspaper *USA Today* has enjoyed great success with its “we”-approach, but sometimes it has made its community too big: when we read headlines like “We’re eating more kelp,” all us non-kelp-eaters suddenly feel left out of the *USA Today* community.

If it helps, draw a circle on a piece of scratch paper. Label it with the name of the community you share with your audience. Then around that circle, draw circles for any larger communities of secondary audience members. Will a memo for your department, for example, also be read by higher management outside the department?

Add to the diagram an arrow to represent your communication. Are you bringing information into the community from outside? Or are you simply moving information from point to point within the community? Then use your drawing as a visual aid as you start planning your communication.

The second question is “How are my audience and I alike and different?” As you answer this question, begin with similarities and differences in **knowledge**. Consider the knowledge you share with your audience and the knowledge you don’t share.

In today’s global marketplace, such consideration is more important than ever. Several years ago, a large computer company explained, in a software manual, the concept of a “default value” in a program by comparing it with the “usual” doughnut you get at your regular coffee shop—if you don’t specifically request a muffin instead. A Japanese representative for the company sent a memo back to

headquarters: “I have difficulty explaining to my customer what is a doughnut and what is a muffin.”

Consider also your similarities and differences in **attitude**. What feelings about this communication do you and your audience share? What feelings don't you share? Some writing and speaking is like paddling downstream, with the current of your audience's attitudes; some is like paddling upstream, against the current.

Finally, consider the **circumstances** in which you and your audience find yourselves. If the communication is face to face, the circumstances are obvious: the room, the lighting, the acoustics, the time of day. But the circumstances of a written communication are just as important. Will your letter compete with 25 others on your reader's desk tomorrow? Or will it be the one letter your reader gets all week?

As we begin to make our communication more “we”-centered, we'll find that **good communication not only requires community; it creates community**. After all, the words “We the People” created a community where none existed before. “We”-centered communication helps us follow Tom Peters's advice, in *Thriving on Chaos*, to “pursue ‘horizontal’ management” and “involve everyone in everything.” It helps us see ourselves and our readers or listeners not as isolated blocks on a line-and-block chart but as points in a network. In short, it helps us lead ourselves and our organizations into the information age.

Chapter 2: Make Holes, Not Drills

Define Your Purpose

A consultant once told the executives of a major tool company, “You’re not in the business of making drills; you’re in the business of making holes.”

Too many of us ignore that truth in our letters and memos. We focus on the piece of writing—the tool—itsself, not on its purpose. The result: our writing often misses the chance to be as effective as it could be.

Mark McCormack, in *What They Still Don’t Teach You at Harvard Business School*, writes that “business memos usually have two purposes—either to project your ideas onto the company or to protect you from other people’s ideas. Make your choice before you write a word. Whether you’re advancing your cause or defending your turf, you’re readers won’t be clear about it unless you are.”

Malcolm Forbes said it too: “Over 10,000 business letters come across my desk every year . . . Here’s the approach I’ve found that separates the winners from the losers (most of it’s just good common sense)—it starts *before* you write your letter: Know what you want.”

As a sample, read this memo, to employees of a *Fortune*-100 company:

In order to have effective controls on automobile repairs and to insure proper and prompt payment of

invoices, all repairs and purchases of tires for automobiles will be administered by Department XXX, effective March 1, 19XX. Prior to taking your automobile to a vendor for work, contact Department XXX, extension XXXX, to obtain a purchase order and release. Complete a blanket purchase order release form with Department XXX as department ordering and price is to be marked advise; complete account code and department charge, then obtain buyer's signature.

Upon completion of form give a copy to the vendor when you take the vehicle in for the service. After the work has been completed check the bill to insure there are no arithmetic or extension discrepancies and verify that sales tax has not been included. On the bill state that service has been received, then have two signatures on the bill with the purchase order and release order number. When the invoice is correct and approved, send it to Department XXX for processing.

*If you have any questions, please contact me.
Thanks for your assistance in this matter.*

If you made it through that, congratulations! If not, you're like most employees of the company. The memo didn't get its job done, mostly because the writer was working at making a drill, not making a hole.

If the writer had thought about his or her *purpose*, he or she might have realized that it was to get employees to comply with a new policy. How to get that compliance? By making it as easy as possible.

Perhaps what the company needed was not a drill—a policy memo—at all, but something else that would have made a better hole. Perhaps a new form, in pads for the glove compartment of company cars, with directions built in. But short of that, the memo still could have achieved its purpose better by stating that purpose more clearly and by putting the steps in a numbered list.

One of my clients, an insurance CEO, was concerned about the poor quality of memos coming across his desk. Their problem wasn't misspelling or bad grammar. It was an overall lack of clarity. He scheduled a series of meetings with his senior staff.

As a result of those meetings, the company adopted, on a trial basis, a new memo form. Gone is the familiar “Subject” line—a label that began solely for filing purposes and that positively *invites* vagueness. In its place is a “Purpose” line, with two choices:

Purpose:

[] *to tell you about:*

[] *to ask you to:*

The writer checks either or both of these purposes and fills in the blank or blanks.

For the writer, the new form demands that the “hole,” not just the drill, be considered, right at the beginning of the writing process. If the writer of the automobile memo had used this form, he or she might have checked both purposes, and written:

Purpose:

[x] to tell you about: the new auto-repair policy

[x] to ask you to: do the following steps when you need repairs or tires

A better memo would surely have followed.

The new form also helps the reader. When you get a memo on the form, you know right up front whether you're just being told *about* something or being asked to *do* something. You can decide immediately whether to read the rest of the memo or set it aside. If you read it, you can read it with the purpose in mind.

Shortly after we designed the memo form, Mark McCormack's *What They Still Don't Teach You in Harvard Business School* appeared, with a list of the eight "toughest" messages to deliver: "(1) This is how you do it. (2) I want to sell you. (3) I goofed. (4) I have some bad news for you. (5) I did a great job. (6) Dear Boss, you're wrong. (7) This is my demand. (8) This is how you rate."

McCormack continues, "I would read a memo that began with any one of these sentences."

Try it. Try stating your purpose as the first sentence in the draft of your next memo or letter. Even if you later decide that's not the best time to say it, at least you'll have thought about your purpose. The rest of the memo or letter is bound to be more effective.

You'll be making holes, not drills.

Chapter 3: Get Your Stuff Together

Collect Your Information

I know it's happened to you. You've bought something that needs assembling: a swing set or a ceiling fan or a bookcase. An hour's work, tops. But the instructions are badly written, so you don't read them all. Instead you just start working. Soon you discover that you need a tool or part that you don't have, so work stops while you make a trip to a hardware store. An hour later you're back on the job, and it happens again. Again you stop work to go buy what you need. The one-hour job stretches into three or four.

I know it's happened to you because it's happened to me. And it happens to most of us when we *write*. We jump into writing memos and letters without making sure that we have the materials—the information—that we need. So we keep interrupting our writing to find that information. As a result, the job takes longer and the writing is less effective. We need to learn to get our stuff together before we start.

The information for a piece of writing can come from two places: outside your mind, the stuff you don't know yet; and inside your mind, the stuff you already know. The outside information can come from other people or from written sources. For information from other people, learn good interviewing techniques. Especially, follow the advice of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus in their book *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*: “Successful leaders, we have found, are *great askers*, and they do pay attention.”

To be a “great asker,” **learn to ask “W and H” questions, not “yes-no” questions:** ask questions that begin with *Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How*. And then pay attention to the answers; don’t be so busy thinking of your next question that you don’t listen to the information you’re getting.

For information from written sources, learn to be a good user of libraries and other databases. An excellent book on finding such information is Alden Todd’s *Finding Facts Fast*, published by Ten Speed Press.

Build an efficient personal library; keep close to your desk the books and files you find yourself consulting often. The books might include a dictionary, a one-volume encyclopedia, an atlas, an almanac, and the specialized reference books of your business or profession. More and more reference books, of course, are available in computer-readable form, on disk or on CD-ROM.

Also post prominently at your desk the phone number of the reference department of your local public or university library. Reference librarians can supply a great amount of information for free, over the phone.

Other information is inside your mind, facts you already know. It’s still important to get this information together early in the writing process. Again, ask the basic “W and H” questions and jot down your answers. Also ask the following four pairs of questions about the subject of your memo, letter, or report:

- How is my subject *like* others? How is it *different* from others?
- Of what larger *whole* is my subject a part? Into what *parts* can my subject be divided?

- In what *time* or times does my subject exist? In what *space* or spaces?
- What is the *cause* or causes of my subject? What is the *effect* or effects?

But whatever means you use, **get your stuff together before you start drafting.** Then your one-hour assembly job can be done in an hour, with much more effective results.

Chapter 4: Get Your Ducks in a Row

Organize Your Information

In an early episode of the *M*A*S*H* television series, an unexploded bomb lands in the compound. Hawkeye and Trapper are assigned to defuse it. Radar locates a bomb-defusing manual, and Colonel Blake, safely behind a sandbag bunker, reads it aloud through a bullhorn.

“First you need a wrench,” he reads. Hawkeye and Trapper find one. “All right, now, place it gently on the nut just above the locking ring and loosen.” They do. “Now, rotate the locking ring counterclockwise.” They figure out which way is counterclockwise and rotate it. “Now, remove the tail assembly.” They do. “And carefully cut the wires leading to the clockwork fuse at the head.” Snip. Snip. “But first, remove the fuse. . . .”

The resulting explosion dramatizes one of the toughest things about communication: language is *linear*. That is, language is made up of one word, phrase, or sentence after another. It’s usually read or heard in a “straight line,” from beginning to end. Thought, on the other hand, is usually not linear. When we know about something, we know it “all at once,” as a network of simultaneous, interconnected ideas.

Changing this nonlinear thought into linear language is one of the most difficult and important steps in the communication process.

The writer of the bomb-defusing manual knew the subject but didn't consider the order in which readers would be reading it. The result was—to say the least—a less than effective piece of writing. An effective piece of writing is organized: it presents its information in the order that best serves the writer's purpose and the reader's needs.

Fortunately, most of us don't have to write life-and-death instructions. But attention to organization can help even our routine messages. Consider this memo, from a *Fortune*-100 company:

SUBJECT: Roadway identification in parking lots

During our Safety Coordinators' meeting, the point was made that with our energy conservation program (during the hours of darkness, fog, etc.) roadway identification in our parking lots is hazardous. The recommendation was raised that we might use a fluorescent-type reflecting paint. Would you please investigate the feasibility of this recommendation and advise me as to your decision on implementation?

Your early response is appreciated.

That's not a terrible memo. But if you're like most people, you had to read it at least twice to make sense of it. That's because the writer—like the writer from *M*A*S*H*—seems to have put the information down in the order he or she thought of it, not in the order you can *use* it.

After reading the first and second sentences of the memo, you had no idea how to use that information, so you had to dismiss it and keep on reading. Only with the third sentence did you know what to do. By that time, however, you'd

forgotten what the first two sentences said. So you had to read them again.

Here's my suggested revision. It may not be a perfect memo, but it at least gives information in an order you can use it—an order more likely to get results:

SUBJECT: Fluorescent paint in parking lots

Could we use fluorescent reflecting paint in our parking lots to make traffic lanes easier to see?

During our Safety Coordinators' meeting, someone pointed out that with our reduced lighting, roadway identification is difficult when it's dark or foggy.

Please find out whether this solution will work, and let me know within a week.

Thanks.

While this kind of reorganizing can be done at the revising stage of the writing process, that's a little like changing the floor plan of a house after you've built it. Organizing your information is best done at the planning stage of the writing process. For most letters and memos, you'll need only a minute or two to decide what information your reader should get first, second, third.

By taking that minute or two to “get your ducks in a row,” you'll be doing your reader a great service. And you'll also be making the communication process easier for you. When you have decided in advance what the main sections of your piece of writing will be and in what order they will come, you won't have to interrupt your drafting to make those decisions. And because you have divided your task

into parts, you will have turned a long, complicated writing job into several shorter, simpler ones. You can write your letter, memo, or speech one section at a time.

In this information age, organizing your communication is more important than ever. John Naisbitt states the problem in *Megatrends*: “We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge.” Software entrepreneur Neil Larson offers the solution: “Knowledge is information with structure.”

Chapter 5: Do It Wrong the First Time

Draft without Editing

Hate to write? Welcome to the club.

Writing letters, memos, and reports is hard work, and even many pros dread the laborious process of getting words on paper or computer screen. **But writing *can* be easier. The secret is to do it wrong the first time.**

In a business environment that worships quality, that advice may seem sacrilegious. At IBM, for example, posters on the walls explicitly proclaim “Do It Right the First Time.” But consider: when IBM engineers develop a new computer, they don’t worry about making the first one perfect, as if they were going to sell it to a customer. The first one or two—probably even the first one or two dozen—are *prototypes*, built for testing and refining. Building and testing these imperfect prototypes is an important step in finally “doing it right.”

That’s not how most of us write, however. We try to skip the prototype stage and go right to the final product. Most of us edit carefully as we write, pausing every few words to check spelling or punctuation or grammar.

For most of us, that habit began in elementary school, when “rewriting” was a bad word, something we had to do when we didn’t write well enough at first, something that kept us in from recess. By high school or college, many of us had learned to compose at the typewriter, making up the final

copy as we went along. In the days before computers and correcting typewriters, many of us found that when we mistyped the first letter of a word, it was easier to think of a synonym than to erase and retype. We were determined to get it right the first time.

We were like the medieval monk in the Jim Unger cartoon who has spent perhaps a week drawing a beautiful illuminated letter “B” in the upper left corner of his parchment. He calls to his brother monk across the room, “Hey! Is there another word for ‘Verily’ that starts with a ‘B’?”

In the long run, stopping to edit while we draft breaks our train of thought and keeps us from being as smart or creative as we could be. Moreover, it commits us to the illusion of perfection much too early, keeping us from doing the later revision that could help our writing get its job done better. In the long run, getting it right the first time keeps us from communicating as effectively as we could. Our careers suffer.

The solution: “quick and dirty” drafting, drafting done without the interruptions of editing. Give it a try right now. Get out a paper and pen, or start up your word processing program. Then write for ten minutes, as fast as you physically can, literally *without stopping*. Don’t stop to think of what to say (just say, “I don’t know what to write, I don’t know what to write” until you think of what to write); don’t stop to read what you’ve written; don’t stop to worry about spelling, punctuation, or grammar; don’t stop to change anything. (Hint: if you’re writing at a computer, turn off the monitor—or turn down its brightness.)

At the end of ten minutes you may not have Pulitzer-Prize-winning prose, but you’ll have more than you’ve ever

written in ten minutes. And more important, you'll have learned what it feels like to write without the interference of editing.

In a real situation, of course, you will have prepared for this quick and dirty draft by asking some important questions about your reader, purpose, subject matter, and organization. In short, you will have done the *planning* recommended so far in this book. But even in a real situation, you can then draft virtually without stopping. If you don't know how to spell a word, just approximate; you or your spell-checker can fix it later. If you don't know which of two words to use, use them both; you can decide when you look at your draft again. **For now, just get comfortable with doing it wrong the first time.**

Bradley S. Hayden of Western Michigan University has said that “drafts are like newly born children: We can't expect them to go to graduate school when they are only a few days old. The most important thing is for them to have arrived into the world safely.”

Ken Blanchard and Robert Lorber wrote in *Putting the One Minute Manager to Work*, “Anything worth doing does not have to be done perfectly—at first.” Or as William Faulkner put it, “Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it's the only way you can do anything really good.”

Chapter 6: Take a Break and Change Hats

Get a Fresh View of Your Writing

Perhaps the most important stage in the writing process is the “down” time: the time you’re not writing. Though you may have trouble justifying this to your boss, or to your spouse, it’s true. This important stage is the time between drafting and revising, when you should get away from your writing—for minutes, for hours, or (if possible) for days. It’s the time to take a break and change hats.

We business people usually wear two hats when we write: the writer’s rumpled fedora and the editor’s green eyeshade. Of course, they’re not really hats; they’re activities in the brain underneath.

One of those activities—occupying a big part of the brain—is the unbelievably complex job of converting ideas into hand movements. Watch it at work. You’re at your computer, writing up your travel expenses, and remembering the blue sedan you rented at O’Hare to get you around town. Your brain moves some muscles in the middle finger of your left hand, then the little finger, then the index. The word *car* appears on the screen.

In short, that part of your brain knows how to write—at least the mechanical operations. Call it your **Internal Writer**, in the rumpled fedora.

But psychologists tell us that another mental activity is also involved. It occupies the part of your brain that remembers

the sedan and knows where you put the charge slip. It's the part that knows how expense reports look and what you can include on them. It's the part that also knows all those grammar and punctuation rules.

That part of your brain is like a newspaper editor, making assignments *and* reviewing the finished work. Call it your **Internal Editor**, in the green visor.

The biggest writing problem most of us have is trying to wear both hats at the same time. As you write a letter or memo or report, your Internal Writer has to work very hard to coordinate the muscles that form the words. But all the time it's doing that, it also has to listen to your Internal Editor, hassling it about every word, every sentence.

And nobody hassles you like your Internal Editor does. It's had great teachers: all the instructors and managers you've ever had. In fact, your Internal Editor *is* those instructors and managers, preserved intact in your mind long after they've left your life. As you write, that inner voice is always there, word by word, sentence by sentence, making you insecure about what you're saying and how you're saying it.

The answer: do what the pros do. Wear one hat a time. Before your Internal Writer goes to work, demand that your Internal Editor make the most complete assignment possible. In other words, use your Internal Editor to go through the "Plan" stage of the writing process, following the steps covered so far in this book:

- [1. Find the "We."](#) Identify the community to which you and your reader both belong; consider the ways you and your reader are alike and different in knowledge, attitudes, and circumstances.

- [2. Make Holes, Not Drills.](#) Establish the purpose of your writing. Remember that most business writing either tells the reader *about* something or asks the reader to *do* something.
- [3. Get Your Stuff Together.](#) Gather the information that you want to include in the letter, memo, or report. Decide how much goes in and how much stays out.
- [4. Get Your Ducks in a Row.](#) Determine the order in which your reader should get your information. What should come first? Second? Last?

When your Internal Editor has made a complete assignment—has finished the planning stage of the process—then get him or her out of the way so your Internal Writer can work without interference.

That’s easier said than done, of course. Your Internal Editor won’t willingly shut up. But with discipline and practice, you can learn to turn off your Internal Editor while you produce the quick and dirty drafts recommended in the previous section of this book. As that section said, you can learn to “Do It Wrong the First Time.”

Then take a break. Literally, get away from your writing—overnight if possible, but at least five minutes—so that you can come back to it with a fresh perspective. That fresh perspective is important for three reasons: (1) it lets you see what you really wrote, not what you meant to write; (2) it helps you see the writing from the reader’s viewpoint, not the writer’s; and (3) it frees you from some of your ego investment in the work.

That last reason is especially important. Writing is like poker; if you think of the money you’ve put into the pot as *yours*, you’ll make bad betting decisions. And when you’ve

invested time and effort in a piece of writing, you're bound to be reluctant to change anything. But to be a good writer, you've got to lose that reluctance. Taking a break lets you fool yourself a little: "Hey, here's that letter I've been putting off. Someone must have written it *for* me. Hmm—not bad, but not quite up to my standards. Let's see what I can do."

So now let your Internal Editor have a crack at the writing, always keeping the reader's point of view in mind. For example, read these paragraphs, by a vice president for personnel at one of my client companies, a large financial firm:

I received the results from the Spring XXX examinations. I want to extend my congratulations to you for your success in passing Parts I & II. I know that to achieve this success took a special effort on your part.

I am pleased that you are interested in your personal development and have taken the initiative to improve your knowledge of the XXX business and to increase your value to the Company.

Not bad for a quick and dirty draft. But when the VP took a break and put on his editor's hat, he realized that the letter was very "I-centered." Each of the four sentences had "I" as the subject, as if the most important thing in the message was what the VP thought and felt. That kind of self-centeredness is very typical of first drafts; the Internal Writer knows how to write, but doesn't know much about other people.

So the VP let his Internal Editor go to work, changing the letter's emphasis. The result:

Congratulations on passing XXX Parts I & II. Your success reflects a special effort on your part.

Your interest in your personal development and the initiative to improve your knowledge of the XXX business certainly increase your value to the company.

While more could still be done, the letter has been greatly improved. Given the chance to work alone, the Internal Editor can do a pretty good job. So can the Internal Writer—freed from the Internal Editor’s hassling.

The rest of this book will contain sections on the **revising** stage of the writing process, with specific, powerful tools to help your Internal Editor improve your drafts. But even without those new tools, your Internal Editor can do good work—as long as it doesn’t have to work at the same time as your Internal Writer.

So give it a try. Wear one hat at a time. And watch your letters and memos get things done for you.

Chapter 7: Signal Your Turns

Guide Your Reader from Sentence to Sentence

The late Malcolm Forbes said it best: “People who read business letters are as human as thee and me. Reading a letter shouldn’t be a chore.”

That’s our job as writers—making the act of reading as easy as possible, so that our readers can give all their attention to *what we are saying*. At the revising stage of our writing process, we need to make sure that our writing “flows,” moving the reader smoothly from one sentence to the next.

Read the following paragraph. I think you’ll agree that it *doesn’t* flow. The sentences seems “choppy,” with awkward changes of direction. The writer seems unsure about where he or she is going. The paragraph, in fact, isn’t really a paragraph at all, just a collection of disconnected sentences. Reading it is a chore.

The next sample, Formula D-7, is an excellent adhesive. It was the strongest of any tested. It was one of the most water-resistant. It has several disadvantages. Its cost is fairly high. Its viscosity would perhaps require new application equipment. Its viscosity would perhaps require modifications in existing equipment. Its storage-temperature requirements are rather strict. In my judgment, these disadvantages are outweighed by its overall

One important way to improve the readability of your writing—to make it less of a chore for your reader—is by using what I call “turn signals,” words or phrases that show the relationship of each sentence with a previous one. These words or phrases are like the turn signals on a car; the writer (like a driver) uses them to signal changes in direction. Such signals make it easier for the reader to *follow* the writer through a memo, letter, or report.

One authority on writing, Ross Winterowd, has pointed out that there are only six possible relationships between sentences. Each has its own turn signals.

The first relationship can be signaled by the word ***and***. Two sentences have an *and* relationship when the second sentence simply adds more information of the same kind. An *and* relationship is thus like a plus sign in mathematics. Besides the word *and*, this relationship can be signaled with such words and phrases as *also*, *too*, *moreover*, *furthermore*, *in addition*, *next*, *second*, *third*, and the like.

In the sample paragraph, the second and third sentences have such a relationship: the advantage cited in sentence 3 is meant to be *added*, in our reader’s mind, to the advantage cited in sentence 2:

It was the strongest of any tested. It was one of the most water-resistant.

To signal that relationship to our reader, we can add the word *and* after the second sentence; then (as a bonus) we can eliminate the repeated words *It was* and combine the two sentences:

It was the strongest of any tested and one of the most water-resistant.

The next possible relationship is usually signaled by the word *or*. Two sentences have an *or* relationship when they present alternatives. Besides the word *or*, this relationship can be signaled with the words *alternatively* and *otherwise*.

The two “viscosity” sentences have an *or* relationship, expressing alternative ways of solving a problem:

Its viscosity would perhaps require new application equipment. Its viscosity would perhaps require modifications in existing equipment.

We can make things easier for our reader by adding the word *or* between the sentences, and by deleting the words *Its viscosity would perhaps require*, the second time they are used:

Its viscosity would perhaps require new application equipment or modifications in existing equipment

Once we have combined these two “viscosity” sentences, we now have a series of three sentences about disadvantages of the adhesive. These sentences all have an *and* relationship, so we can make them into a series using the word *and*:

Its cost is fairly high, its viscosity would perhaps require new application equipment or modifications in existing equipment, and its storage-temperature requirements are rather strict.

Although that’s a fairly long sentence, it’s easier to read than the three disconnected sentences we had before.

The third relationship between sentences can be signaled by the word **but**. Two sentences have a *but* relationship when the second sentence contradicts, or partially contradicts, or qualifies, the first. Besides the word *but*, this relationship can be signaled with such words and phrases as *however*, *nevertheless*, *nonetheless*, and *on the other hand*.

One *but* relationship occurs before the sentence “It has several disadvantages.” This sentence contradicts, or at least qualifies, the previous sentences, which were about advantages.. So we can help our reader by adding a *but* turn signal to this sentence. For example, we could say, “It *nevertheless* has several disadvantages.”

Similarly, the sentence beginning “In my judgment” has a *but* relationship with its preceding sentences. Those preceding sentences were about disadvantages, but now we’re about to make a positive judgment. For variety, we might add the word *However* at the beginning of this sentence to signal the turn.

The fourth and fifth possible relationships are really the same relationship seen from two different sides. Two sentences have a *so* relationship when the second expresses the result or conclusion or effect of the first sentence. Besides the word *so*, this relationship can be signaled with words and phrases like *therefore*, *thus*, and *for this reason*.

The *because* relationship is the opposite of the *so* relationship: two sentences have a *because* relationship when the second gives the cause or reason for the first. Besides the word *because*, this relationship can be signaled with such words as *since* and *for*.

In the sample paragraph, the last two sentences have a *so* relationship. We might signal this relationship by adding

the word *therefore* to the last sentence, at any of several points near the beginning of that sentence.

However, in my judgment, these disadvantages are outweighed by its overall quality. I therefore recommend that Formula D-7 be used for the project.

The last relationship is often signaled with a **colon**. Two sentences have a *colon* relationship when the second sentence gives specifics for the generalization made in the first sentence. Beside a colon, this relationship can be signaled with words and phrases like *specifically*, *for example*, and *to illustrate*.

The first sentence of the sample paragraph has a *colon* relationship with the combined sentence that follows it. The first sentence says that the adhesive is excellent; the next sentences gives the specific ways it is excellent. So we can signal where we are going by adding a colon after that first sentence:

The next sample, Formula D-7, is an excellent adhesive: it was the strongest of any tested and one of the most water-resistant.

In the same way, the sentence reporting that the adhesive has several disadvantages has a *colon* relationship with the following series. So we can put a colon after that sentence as well:

It nevertheless has several disadvantages: its cost is fairly high, its viscosity would perhaps require new application equipment or modifications in existing equipment, and its storage-temperature requirements are rather strict.

The following paragraph shows the result of adding all these turn signals—and, as a byproduct, deleting some repeated words. I hope you agree it's a much improved paragraph. Naturally, this particular information could be presented in other ways: in a table, for example. But whenever you're writing sentences, you can use turn signals to make your writing much easier to read:

The next sample, Formula D-7, is an excellent adhesive: it was the strongest of any tested and one of the most water-resistant. It nevertheless has several disadvantages: its cost is fairly high, its viscosity would perhaps require new application equipment or modifications in existing equipment, and its storage-temperature requirements are rather strict. However, in my judgment, these disadvantages are outweighed by its overall quality. I therefore recommend that Formula D-7 be used for the project.

One final note: if you go back now and read the original paragraph, you may find that it looks better to you than you first thought. That's because you now know where it's going. You don't need as many turn signals.

That's the position you're always in when you read your *own* drafts. Because you know where you're going, you may not feel a need for turn signals. But turn signals aren't for you. They're for the person following you.

So use turn signals even more than you think you need to. If you do, reading your memos, letters, and reports won't be as much of a chore.

Chapter 8: Say What You Mean

Put Your Point in Your Subjects and Verbs

Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, also wrote one of the first business how-to books in English, *The Complete English Tradesman*, published in 1745. In that book, Defoe says, “A tradesman’s letters should be plain, concise, and to the purpose He that affects a rumbling and bombast style and fills his letter with compliments and flourishes makes a very ridiculous figure in trade.”

Defoe’s advice stills holds up. Effective business writing gets to the point and says what it means. Specifically, it matches the *structure* of each sentence with the *meaning* of that sentence.

So at the revising stage of your writing process, check sentence structure, especially subjects and verb. **Check that most of your grammatical subjects and verbs are the “real” subjects and verbs of your sentences.**

To understand that point, look at the sentence “It is difficult to control total expenses.” The grammatical subject is *it*, but that’s hardly the “real” subject, the noun or pronoun the sentence is *about*. The reader subconsciously tries to find meaning in that subject and comes up empty-handed.

The “real” subject of the sentence is *expenses* or, perhaps, *control*, both “hidden” later in the sentence. The sentence can be improved by making the hidden, real subject also

the grammatical subject. So consider revising the sentence to “Total expenses are difficult to control” or “Controlling total expenses is difficult.” When the reader reads the subject, he or she knows what the sentence is about.

One common place to find hidden subjects is in sentences beginning with *There*: “There needs to be more tribute paid to these unselfish workers.”

The real subject of that sentence is not *There*, but *tribute*, or perhaps even *workers*. Depending on which of these nouns you want to emphasize, you could improve the sentence in either of two ways: “More tribute should be paid to these unselfish workers” or “These unselfish workers deserve more tribute.”

Even more common than hidden subjects are hidden verbs. English has a tendency—no, English *tends*—to “nominalize”; to make verbs into nouns. *Tend*, for example, is a verb, but it is often changed into the noun *tendency*. Once you have made that change, you don’t have a verb in your sentence any more, so you insert a “filler” verb like *has* or *gives* or *makes*:

- He *tends* to be late.
- He *has* a *tendency* to be late.

Look at the sentence “The committee reached an agreement on the project.” The verb is *reached*, but that’s not the “real” verb, the action that the committee performed. The committee didn’t *reach*, they *agreed*. *Reached* is a filler verb; the real verb, *agree*, has been changed into the noun *agreement*. So consider revising the sentence to “The committee agreed on the project.”

Pay special attention to sentences beginning with *It is*, *There is*, and *There are*. Such sentences often have neither the “real” subject nor the “real” verb in the subject and verb positions:

- It is not until Wednesday that the parts will arrive.
- There is a wide range of costs.
- There are drawbacks to using this accounting method.

The grammatical subjects and verbs of all three sentences are absolutely empty.

In the first sentence, the real subject is *parts*, and the real verb is *arrive*. So consider revising it to “The parts will arrive Wednesday,” or “The parts will not arrive until Wednesday” (depending on whether you’re the supplier, promising, or the buyer, complaining).

In the second sentence, the real subject is *costs*, and the real verb is *range*. So revise to “Costs range widely.” And in the third sentence, the real subject is probably *accounting method*, and the real verb might be *has*, as in the revision “This accounting method has its drawbacks.”

So consider revising sentences like “It is helpful to check subjects and verbs” to “Checking subjects and verbs helps.” You’ll be saying what you mean, and you’ll be a more effective communicator.

Chapter 9: Pay by the Word

Make Your Sentences Economical

Norman R. Augustine, president and CEO of Martin Marietta, once calculated the relationship between thickness and dollar amount of government contract proposals. After sharing the result, he wrote, “If all the proposals conforming to this standard were piled on top of each other at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, it would probably be a good idea.”

Most readers of government and business writing agree that much of it is too long. But who’s to blame? As Pogo said, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” Many of us in business and government write as if we were getting paid by the word.

In fact, the opposite is true. We, and our organizations, are *paying* by the word. We are paying directly in time and materials: a recent survey estimated the total cost of the average business letter at about \$100. But we are also paying indirectly: each unnecessary word costs us the attention and good will of our readers.

Let me make an analogy. Suppose next Monday you arrive at your office and find an envelope from me. Inside is a \$10 bill. Tuesday and Wednesday you find the same. By Thursday, you look forward with pleasure to opening my envelope. By the time the last envelope comes on Friday,

you're feeling very good about Ken Davis and the \$50 I've sent you.

Now suppose, instead, that Monday's envelope holds a dollar. On Tuesday there's 25 cents, and on Wednesday there's 75. You're intrigued, but disappointed when Thursday's envelope, sealed with strapping tape, holds only a nickel. The letters keep coming, on into the next week and the weeks after, some with as much as a couple of dollars, but most with small change. My envelopes become less and less important to you. Even if after several months you've received the same \$50, you don't feel nearly as good about me. You've had to work too hard for the money.

That's how reading is. Reading a word is like opening an envelope: it requires a small but measurable amount of work. If each envelope or word contains something of value, we continue with anticipation. If most envelopes or words do not, we become bored, and maybe give up. So when you use 100 words instead of 200 to say something, you not only save money, you also have a much better chance of keeping your reader's attention and good will.

To make your business writing more economical, do it as you revise, not as you draft. Don't interrupt the flow of that draft to worry whether you've used too many words. Just put down the words as they come, even if you're going to cut some out later.

Then after you've taken a break, come back to your writing and apply some objectivity and common sense. Read each sentence and ask yourself, "Do I need to say this? If so, do I need to use this many words?"

Look, for example, at this sentence: “The car was blue in color.” That’s a sentence any of us could have drafted. But at the revision stage you might realize that everyone knows that blue is a color. So revise the sentence to “The car was blue.”

As you go, try to do what Strunk and White call “which-hunting”: look for the *whiches*, *whos*, and *thats* in your draft. Some are necessary, but some can be eliminated by rearranging the sentence. For example, you can change the phrase “a commission which consists of ten members” into “a ten-member commission.” Similarly, you can revise the sentence “The state has vast deposits of coal which have not yet been developed” into “The state has vast undeveloped coal deposits.”

Look also for prepositions, especially *of*. Again, they’re often necessary, but they sometimes can be eliminated. For example, the sentence “The number of applications to schools of business is on the increase” has four prepositions. All can be cut; the sentence can be revised to “Business school applications are increasing.”

With these simple tools, you can begin saving money on your writing and getting a better response from your readers. Many companies are learning the value of such economy. A 3M vice president told Tom Peters, “We consider a coherent *sentence* to be an acceptable first draft for a new-product plan.” So remember, you’re paying by the word. Make sure each word is worth what it costs you.

Chapter 10: Translate into English

Make Your Words Simple

One of Lee Iacocca's "Eight Commandments of Good Management" is "Say it in English and keep it short." The previous chapter of this book gave tools for honoring the second part of Iacocca's commandment. In this chapter, you'll learn a powerful tool for honoring the first part: "Say it in English."

Read the following excerpt from the instructions for the federal income tax forms for 1976:

The Privacy Act of 1974 provides that each Federal Agency inform individuals, whom it asks to supply information, of the authority for the solicitation of the information and whether disclosure of such information is mandatory or voluntary; the principal purpose or purposes for which the information is to be used; the routine uses which may be made of the information; and the effects on the individual of not providing the requested information. This notification applies to the U.S. Individual Income Tax Returns, to declarations of estimated tax, to U.S. Gift Tax returns, and to any other tax return required to be filed by an individual, and to schedules, statements, or other documents related to the returns, and any subsequent inquiries necessary to complete, correct, and process the returns of taxpayers, to determine

the correct tax liability and to collect any unpaid tax, interest, or penalty.

In 1976, Jimmy Carter was elected president. One of his immediate efforts was to revise the language of government documents. So by the time the 1977 tax instructions were published, that first Privacy Act paragraph had been revised:

The Privacy Act of 1974 says that each Federal agency that asks you for information must tell you the following:

- 1. Its legal right to ask for the information and whether the law says you must give it.*
- 2. What purpose the agency has in asking for it, and the use to which it will be put.*
- 3. What could happen if you do not give it.*

For the Internal Revenue Service, the law covers the following:

- 1. Tax returns and any papers you file with them.*
- 2. Any questions we need to ask you so we can—(a) complete, correct, or process your returns, (b) figure your tax, and (c) collect tax, interest, or penalties.*

These two pieces of writing, the 1976 original and its 1977 revision, have the same meaning: by law, they must say essentially the same thing. But you have probably found the 1977 version to be much more readable and understandable. Perhaps the most obvious reasons for this

increased readability are at the paragraph and sentence levels, as discussed in earlier sections of this book: relationships have been more clearly signaled, “hidden” verbs have been eliminated, and sentences have been restructured to avoid overtaxing the reader’s short-term memory. But the most important revisions may be less obvious, occurring at the level of individual words. Notice the following changes:

1976 / 1977

- provides / says
- inform / tell
- individuals / you
- authority / right
- solicit / ask
- provide / give
- effects / what could happen
- inquire / ask

To understand the nature of these revisions, it may help to look briefly at the history of our language. The most important date in that history is 1066, when a French duke named William invaded England in what has become known as the Norman Conquest. The inhabitants of England before that invasion were largely of German origin, and they spoke a Germanic language we now call Old English. But William and his conquering forces spoke a Latinate language, an early form of French, and so as he set up a new government over the conquered English, he imposed a new language on the country.

For the next couple of centuries, both languages existed in England: Norman French as the official language of government and business, and Old English as the everyday language of most common people. Gradually, however, the

languages merged into what we now call Middle English, a language that drew its vocabulary from both Germanic and Latinate sources. Soon, it was enriched by even more Latinate words as the Renaissance spread from southern Europe into England, and modern English was born. This new language, essentially the language we speak and write today, thus derives from two major language families and so has the largest vocabulary of any language in the world.

In activities like farming that were largely untouched by either the Norman Conquest or the Renaissance, today's English words remain largely Germanic in their origin. In other activities, like the performing arts, that were heavily influenced by the Latin countries, our words are largely Latinate in origin. John Brunner, in his science fiction novel *The Shockwave Rider*, demonstrates this difference:

This is a basic place, a farm. Listen to it.

*Land. House. Barn. Sun. Rain. Snow. Field. Fence.
Pond. Corn. Wheat. Hay. Plow. Sow. Reap. Horse.
Pig. Cow.*

This is an abstract place, a concert hall. Listen to it.

*Conductor. Orchestra. Audience. Overture.
Concerto. Symphony. Podium. Harmony.
Instrument. Oratorio. Variations. Arrangement.
Violin. Clarinet. Piccolo. Tympani. Pianoforte.
Auditorium.*

As Brunner points out, you can “listen” to the difference between the two sets of words. The words in the “farm” list sound plainer; the words in the “concert hall” list sound fancier. Those in the first list are of Germanic origin: forms of these words were used by English farmers before and

after the Norman Conquest. Those in the second list are Latinate, brought in, as needed, to a society that had no native words for most of the things they describe.

Many concepts, of course, were part of the language of both Old English and Norman French speakers; these include many common nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and (especially) verbs. As a result, Modern English has a very large number of synonyms from Latinate and Germanic sources. Here are some examples:

Latinate / Germanic

- converse / talk
- frequently / often
- proceed / go
- require / need
- initial / first
- dispatch / send
- depart / leave
- discover / find

A surprising fact, when you think about it, is that **over 900 years after the Norman Conquest, these two lists of words still carry a class difference.** The Latinate words still seem to us fancier and more “educated,” just as the French-speaking officials must have seemed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Germanic words still seem to us plainer and less “educated,” just as the Old English-speaking peasants must have seemed then. Perhaps as a result of this difference in perception of the two lists of words, the Latinate words tend to find their way into business, governmental, and academic writing. For example, it was perhaps because of a desire to sound “official” that the writer of the 1976 tax instructions used so many Latinate words in that document; in fact, the

“1976” word list is made up entirely of Latinate-origin words.

That wouldn’t be a problem except for one important fact: writing made up heavily of Latinate words is more difficult to read. The longer, Latinate words slow down reading and lead to less understanding, even for well-educated readers. Germanic origin words, on the other hand, make writing more readable. Even educated readers find these shorter, plainer words generally more effective. The revised, “1977,” list is made up entirely of words of Germanic origin.

The reason for the difference in readability does not lie so much in the history of our language as in the personal history of each individual reader. The Germanic synonyms are, in most cases, the ones we all learn first as children, and they are the ones we hear and read most throughout our lives. No matter how much schooling we eventually get, the Germanic words remain more familiar, more easily accessible, to our reading minds. A passage, like the 1977 tax instructions, made up of these simpler words will be read more easily and will communicate its content more effectively.

So a useful tool for revising the words in your business writing is this: unless you have a good reason otherwise, substitute simpler Germanic words for fancier Latinate words. Note, however, that you don’t need to look up word origins to apply this tool. Just **substitute words that a child can understand, and your writing will be more readable for adult readers as well.**

Notice, however, that the tool carries the qualification “unless you have a good reason otherwise.” Many fancier Latinate words are necessary for their **denotation:** as the

“concert hall” list showed, there are plenty of meanings for which no simple, Germanic words exist. Other Latinate words are useful for their **connotation**: the Latinate word *manufacture*, for example, once meant the same thing as the Germanic word *make*, but over the years, *manufacture* has taken on connotations of large-scale, mechanized “making” that give it a place of its own in our language.

Sometimes, too, you will want to choose a Latinate word for **variety**: if you have used *get* several times in a passage, you may want to substitute *obtain* or *secure* or *acquire* for some occurrences of it. And finally, you may want to choose a Latinate word for reasons of **courtesy** (a Latinate word itself, derived from the word for the king’s court): you may sometimes find it more polite, for example, to *inform* than to *tell*. But in general, your writing will be more readable, and thus more effective, if at the revising stage you substitute plainer words for fancier ones.

Naturally, you may be concerned that using simpler words will make you seem less educated or less intelligent. But the great speakers and writers have always known that they are communicating to *express*, not *impress*. Ultimately you must impress your reader or listener with your ideas, not your vocabulary, and a simple, direct vocabulary will help you get those ideas across more effectively. (Sir Winston Churchill, practicing what he preached, wrote “Short words are best and the old words, when short, are best of all.”)

You may also have to overcome an organizational culture that favors difficult language. But make sure you know what the expectations, in fact, are. Kitty O. Locker, in her book *Business and Administrative Communication*, writes “If you think your boss doesn’t want you to write simply, ask him or her. A few bosses do prize flowery language. Most don’t.”

So translate into English. Your writing and speaking will have more power if you do.

Chapter 11: Finish the Job

Check Your Spelling, Punctuation, and Mechanics

What are your biggest communication problems? When I asked that question to several hundred business people, their number one answer was “speaking to a group,” followed by “being persuasive in my speaking and writing.” But high on the list—in fact the highest *writing* problem on the list—was “using correct spelling and punctuation.”

I call that “finishing the job.” I’ve chosen the phrase carefully, to take advantage of the two ways we use the verb *finish*: to mean “end” (as in “I’ve finished the work”) and to mean “put a surface on” (as in “I’ve finished this table with varnish”).

The first meaning of *finish* is important for our purpose because **spelling and punctuation should be the end of our writing process**, the last thing we think about before sending the letter, memo, or report to our reader. Most of us worry about spelling and punctuation much too early in the writing process; as a result, we (1) interrupt the flow of our drafting; (2) waste time correcting words and sentences we might later decide not to use at all; and (3) commit ourselves to the concept of perfection too early, thus blinding ourselves to changes that might really need to be made. So we need to remind ourselves that spelling and punctuation are the way in which we *finish* the process.

The second meaning of *finish* is important for our purpose because **spelling and punctuation are nothing more or less than the *finish*, or surface, on a piece of writing.** On one hand, that makes them very important: they're the first thing our reader sees and judges us on. As Mark H. McCormack wrote in *What They Still Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School*, "Only sloppy executives send out sloppy memos. Perfect grammar and perfect proofreading display professionalism and courtesy to the reader. Even if your suggestions are shot down, you will earn credibility." The late Malcolm Forbes said it too: "Make it perfect. No typos, no misspellings, no factual errors. If you're sloppy and let mistakes slip by, the person reading your letter will think you don't know better or don't care. Do you?"

But on the other hand, the fact that spelling and punctuation are just *finish* keeps their importance in perspective. Just as a shiny coat of paint can't make up for a badly engineered or badly built car underneath, so a perfect spelling and punctuation job can't make up for a badly conceived or written letter.

One reason most Americans (including me) think of ourselves as poor spellers may be a frustration at those endless spelling tests we all took in school. But there's a more important reason for our insecurity—and it's not our fault. We English-speakers have inherited what is almost surely the world's most difficult language to spell.

Speakers of Spanish or Russian or Japanese have much less trouble with spelling. Their languages have developed more straightforwardly, with a neat fit between spelling and pronunciation. English, however, doesn't have such a neat fit, and so it *causes* fits. English developed in twists and turns, absorbing elements from various other languages at

various times. Moreover, it developed the idea of consistent spelling late. A 17th-century merchant might even have spelled his or her own name differently from one day to the next.

So English has become a nightmare of spelling quirks. Imagine someone trying to learn our language. He or she is told that the word *cough* is pronounced COFF; *tough*, however, is not TOFF, but TUFF. Add an *h* to make it *though* and you get THOFF? No. THUFF? No. THOE! And inserting an *r* to make it *through* gives you a fourth sound, THREW. And there's still *bough* and *ought*.

We native speakers don't usually have trouble with those words. Our problem is not with spellings that produce multiple sounds, but with sounds that have multiple or unusual spellings. Our problems are with *ie* and *ei*, with *ance* and *ence*, with single and double consonants. No wonder we are bad spellers.

Yet for a people who *are* bad spellers, we Americans are not especially forgiving of bad spelling by each other. We business people, in particular, single out spelling more than anything else when getting a first impression of a piece of writing. Two or three misspelled words in an otherwise brilliant job application letter can doom that letter to the wastebasket faster than anything else.

So what's the answer? Here are several:

- **When you write with a computer, use a spelling checker.** Most word processing programs, and even some typewriters, now come with built-in dictionaries, and they can save you a lot of time and embarrassment. Remember, though, to spell-check only *after* you have written a draft, not *while* you

are drafting. Interrupting a draft to worry about spelling can take your attention away from more important concerns (so turn off that on-the-fly spell-checker in Microsoft Word). Remember, too, that spelling checkers don't relieve you of the responsibility of improving your spelling skills. For one thing, they can't catch all errors, especially errors that result in real words with different meanings. For another, most of us still do lots of writing without a computer: forms, handwritten messages, and the like.

- **Proofread carefully.** Use the professional proofreader's trick of reading your writing backwards, a word at a time. Starting from the end and reading to the beginning forces you to see each word *as a word*, not as part of a larger meaning. And of course, whenever possible, ask someone else to proofread for you; you can return the favor.
- **When in doubt, look it up.** Keep a good dictionary on your desk, and use it often. (Be sure to get a reputable up-to-date dictionary, keeping in mind that "Webster's" is not a trade mark; anyone can use it, and many bad dictionaries do.)
- **Track your spelling problems.** When you look up a word, put a tick mark beside it in your dictionary. Do the same when your spelling checker finds a mistake. You'll build your own inventory of words you need to learn.
- **Consider learning three or four spelling rules.** If your problems are with *ie* and *ei*—or with what to do with *y*, silent *e*, or single consonants when adding suffixes—there are rules that can help. You can get them from many handbooks.
- **Make up your own tricks.** When a word repeatedly gives you trouble, make up the silliest, most juvenile trick you can for it. As a teacher and

trainer, I often have to write the word *attendance*, but I could never remember whether it ended with *ance* or *ence* until someone told me to remember “Attendance at a dance.” So now that’s what goes through my mind every time I write the word. Don’t laugh—the trick saves me from looking it up.

These tips won’t make you a perfect speller. Given the nature of our language, few people ever spell it perfectly. But with a little effort, you can reduce your errors considerably.

The bad news about punctuation is that it is even less standardized than spelling. Each English-speaking country, each profession, each publication, even each company seems to have its own official or unofficial rules about what and how to punctuate when. So the best advice about this diversity of rules is to find out if the company or publication you’re writing for has an official style sheet, and stick to it.

The *good* news about punctuation is that there is much less to learn about it than about spelling. English has hundreds of thousands of words, but fewer than a dozen commonly used punctuation marks. So begin paying attention to them, and turning to a handbook when you need help.

Together, a few punctuation rules and the spelling tips listed earlier may give you more skill and confidence as a writer. They can’t turn bad writing into good, but they may help you put those important finishing touches on an already good document.

Chapter 12: Manage Your Writing (again)

Take Charge of Your Writing Process

Good managers know the importance of evaluating their work. As a manager of your own writing, you need to end each writing “hour” with two or three minutes of evaluation—not of the written *product* (your Internal Editor has been doing that throughout the “Revise” stage), but of your writing *process*. Which stages of the process needed more time than you gave them? Which stages needed less?

Like the hands on a clock, the writing process doesn’t stop with each cycle. It’s a continuous process. The evaluation you do at the end of one writing job can help you be a better manager at the beginning of the next. Through this recurring process, you’ll continue to grow as a writer for the rest of your life. **You’ll have learned to *manage your writing*.**

About the Author

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