8½ Steps
to Writing Faster, Better

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Plumbers don't get plumber's block, and doctors don't get doctor's block; why should writers be the only profession that gives a special name to the difficulty of working?

– Philip Pullman

“The main difficulty with writing
is that no one ever *taught* you how to do it.
At school—whether high school or college—
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But did they ever tell you *how* to write?
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INTRODUCTION

A Quick Word

You don't have to suffer to write;
adolescence is enough suffering for anyone.

– Paraphrased from John Ciardi

If you don't know how to do it, writing hurts. It's boring and tedious. It makes you feel inept and inadequate. You sit at your computer, staring into the flickering screen, waiting desperately for inspiration. When a few words finally spring to mind, you type rapidly but look at them for mere seconds before hitting the backspace-delete key. *Dammit, I just can't get it right.*

Writing makes you feel stressed. You know it's an important skill. You realize that "good communicators" – the ones who can write killer memos and persuasive materials that make clients ecstatic – earn more money and have more fun than those who don't. But you never feel you're in control of your writing; instead, it controls you. You spend so much time calculating word counts that you start to feel like a dieter operating in reverse. While the weight-watcher wants to lose pounds, you want to *gain words*. But the word count needle moves so slowly it seems stuck.

Writing takes too much time. You'd like to be able to finish that short article in an hour or that report in an afternoon, but you realize it's hopeless. You just can't work that fast. That's bad news if you have a boss, because he or she wants the project *right away,* and you just know the deadline is going to mean another late night at the office. And it's even worse news if you have a client. Then it's not just your pride at risk – it's your income. Time is money, and you can almost hear the dollars trickling away as your fingers fumble over the keyboard.

A tantalizing taste of writing freedom

But then, every once in a long while, something strange happens. You discover you *can* write brilliantly. Your hands fly across the keyboard, trying to keep up with the words flowing freely from your brain. You write as though you have propellers attached to your fingers. It feels fantastic. There's just one problem.

You can't do it regularly; you have no control over it. It's like bumping into a seldom-seen friend at a coffee shop. When it happens, it's a fluke – a happy accident – and, of course, you're thrilled. But you can't *make* it happen. You just have to wait for it.

Or do you?

Why you didn't learn to write in college

The main difficulty with writing is that no one ever *taught* you how to do it. At school – whether high school or college – it was sink or swim. You cranked out the essays, hating every step along the way. Sure, the teachers graded your work, putting little red marks all over it to correct spelling and grammar mistakes. But did they ever tell you *how* to write – beyond telling you not to leave all the work until the night before it's due? Not likely.

Many teachers and most parents assumed writing was largely a question of discipline. If only you put your posterior to the chair a little sooner, or a little longer, then the article, report or essay would be done by now. You just needed to *apply* yourself.

This "buckle down and do it" attitude permeates much of our society – from the gym to the workplace. And although this credo is partly true (since we all have to do *some* tasks we don't enjoy each day), brute forcing yourself to write will likely make you miserable. I know. I did it.

What I learned from the school of hard knocks

I started my writing life in weekly newspapers. I developed many skills there, but not how to write easily and fluently. Something about the distance of the deadline – days away instead of hours – gave a false leisure to the whole enterprise. *Story? Yeah, I'll get around to it. . . tomorrow . . .*

Of course, deadline day was another matter. Have you ever heard how medical doctors describe the field of anesthesia? They say it's 59 minutes of boredom punctuated by one minute of total and complete panic. That's life at a weekly, too. It's feet on the desk for several days, procrastinating. Then, when there's almost no more time left, you hunker down and write.

But finally, after a few years paying those sorts of dues, I'd built up enough credentials to be able to land my first job at a daily. I started by managing the book section. At last, I'd entered the big leagues – as an editor, no less. For a while, I was busy dealing with freelance writers, choosing stories off the wires and writing headlines. But all too soon the day came when I had to write on deadline. My über-boss, a tall, barrel-chested Scot who had a soft spot for literature and poetry, had discovered that British novelist Doris Lessing had just been caught writing under an

assumed name. It didn't matter that I had no hope of interviewing the novelist. He wanted a story for the next edition.

Talk about a crisis! I had no training in how to write fast. I looked around the newsroom and saw myself surrounded by seasoned pros who cranked out stories while arguing with their spouses, planning their next visit to the press club or checking on the antics of their kids. (Much later, I would discover many of them had writing difficulties, too.)

Writing by procrastination

Desperate, I did what every panicked writer does. I researched. I trudged to the morgue – that's newspaper-speak for the library – pulled out some yellowed folders and began to read. This was in the days *before* online search engines, or I would have squandered even more precious time on Google. When I finally started to write, I felt as though I was squeezing anchovy paste out of the old, half-rusted tube at the back of my fridge.

It was agony. I'd write a couple of words, look at them, and erase them. As I went on, the chatter in my head grew louder. *This isn't good enough for a daily newspaper. Thousands of people are going to read this. My boss is going to fire me when he finds out I can't write.*

Somehow, after what felt like days of torment – it was actually "only" a couple of hours – I managed to produce a four-paragraph story. I reluctantly showed it to my immediate boss (who was doing an admirable job of not rolling his eyes). He read it. He had someone else write a headline for it. And it went in the next edition of the newspaper. Simple as that.

I wish I could report that this incident led to some sort of epiphany. Sadly, no. I stumbled along for several more years, torturing myself whenever I had to write a story. Fortunately, this wasn't too often. I was a good editor and mostly, I edited

Getting paid to produce

Ironically, I didn't develop any ease with writing until I'd left journalism, had a bunch of kids and started doing corporate writing and communications. I think a couple of things helped. First, few people in the corporate world could write comfortably, so I was suddenly a writing genius. As a result, I could relax and tell the negative chatter in my brain to shut up. Second, the volume of work I was handling was huge – much more demanding than in my journalistic days. And as a freelancer, I didn't have the luxury of doing one story at a time. I was regularly juggling six, seven or even more.

As well, I had some powerful reasons to work more quickly. Rather than sit and stare at a blank computer screen, I needed to make time to feed and

play with my kids. As well, the economics were stark: in a newsroom, you earn money just for being there. As a freelancer, you are paid only when you produce.

Decoding the writing-speed riddle

As Samuel Johnson said, "There's nothing like the threat of imminent hanging to concentrate the mind." Because I so desperately needed to learn how to write faster, I started reading about writing. And I began to analyze what I was doing.

Right away, I noticed something that was both puzzling and counterintuitive. The more writing assignments I had, the more easily I wrote. Why was this so? Shouldn't I have become more stressed and more blocked? I also noticed that I'd often start "writing" articles in my head, while I was walking somewhere. On my way to the coffee shop, for example, I'd figure out the basic architecture for a piece. Sometimes phrases for the article, or even entire sentences, would pop into my head.

At the same time, I detected a certain reluctance to write whenever I created an outline. Instead of making writing easier, an outline seemed to make it harder – in a funny way, it made me almost resent writing. Wasn't that odd?

But most strikingly, I noticed how often I edited my work "on the fly" – that is, I wrote a few sentences and then immediately started playing around with them to make them better. However, if I *stopped* myself from doing that, and had enough discipline to separate the writing from the editing, my writing speed picked up enormously.

Slowly, painfully, I came to understand that writing involves many separate steps. And by trial and error I learned that the writing process is most effective if you perform those steps in a particular order.

Writing is like painting

Imagine you want to paint a room. Sure, you need to dip a brush in paint and apply it to the walls. But if you're more than ten years old, you know that that's only a tiny part of the job. The real work lies in preparing and cleaning up.

First, you have to strip the old, blistered paint and maybe do a bit of sanding. You have to wash the walls. You need to tape the woodwork – a tedious job – and put down tarps or drop sheets. Often, you'll have to apply a primer or an undercoat first. Then you need to wait until it dries before you can start painting the colour you want. After that you'll need to do touch-ups and repairs. And at the end of the job, you need to clean up.

So the actual painting is neither the beginning nor the end of your

work. It's simply one step in the middle. Professional painters might even tell you it's not the most important step. (They'd probably single out the sanding or the cleaning for that honour.)

How does this apply to writing? After carefully analyzing my own writing, reading many books on the subject and talking to dozens of other writers, I have identified eight and a half distinct steps involved in writing and the specific order in which they should be tackled. I call this the Publication Coach System.

The 8½ steps, summarized

Step 1: Make a plan
Step 2: Research
Step 3: Think and rethink
Step 4: Find your lede
Step 5: Write
Step 6: Let it incubate
Step 7: Revise
Step 8: Copy edit
Step 8½: Read widely

This book will describe each step in detail, giving you a system. Writing won't always be fun and easy, just as painting isn't always fun and easy. Each time you prepare to work, your success hinges on many factors, including your energy and your mood.

But this system will dramatically improve your odds of success. It will also increase the percentage of time you spend in that blissful state with your fingers flying across the keyboard and the words coming as fast as you can type them. That's because you'll be following scientifically recognized principles governing creativity and you won't be sabotaging your own progress.

What's in it for you?

What would happen if you could write faster and better? Consider what it would feel like to *enjoy* writing instead of dreading it. Picture feeling self-assured and in control at the keyboard, instead of feeling stressed and frustrated. Imagine being able to accomplish more work in less time.

Best of all, imagine *writing* – freely and confidently – without having to spend hours mesmerized by a blank, flickering screen.

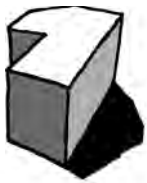
> “Planning may feel like an indulgence,
> an annoyance or a total waste of time.
> Take it from me, it’s not. When you write,
> planning is the single most productive task
> you can possibly choose to perform.
> It will not only help prevent writer’s block,
> it will also save you time.
> But you need to do it the right way.”

STEP 1:

Make a Plan

I arise in the morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. That makes it hard to plan the day.

– E.B. White



Suppose you want to buy a home. (In the crazy city in which I live, that's a million-dollar deal. Literally.) Do you just hope you'll stumble across the right house one day and somehow have enough money to buy it?

Or think about something smaller, less complicated. Say you want to give a big dinner party. Do you invite a dozen people and simply hope there will be enough suitable groceries in the fridge?

Or, finally, to return to the central metaphor of this book, imagine you want to paint a room. Do you just pick up a brush and start flailing away? Of course not. If you want to buy a house, host a dinner party or have a nicely painted room, you need a plan.

It's no different when you write: planning is the crucial first step.

Too busy to plan?

Even skilled professional writers sometimes skimp on planning. If your deadline is tight, you may feel you can't afford the time. If you hated writing outlines in high school or college, you may think planning is boring and tedious. If you have dozens of great ideas ricocheting around your brain, you may be eager to start writing for fear of forgetting good material.

In short, planning may feel like an indulgence, an annoyance or a total waste of time. Take it from me, it's not. When you write, planning is the single most productive task you can possibly choose to perform. It will not only help prevent writer's block, it will also *save* you time. But you need to do it the right way.

The mother of all plans

You may have noticed that the first four steps in the Publication Coach System (make a plan; research; think and rethink; find your lede) are *all*

planning tasks – that is, they take place before you start writing. But the "make a plan" step is the big mama, the most important one.

This step is also really simple. Experienced copywriters and veteran corporate communicators will already know that it hinges on answering three straightforward questions.

Before going on, let me pause briefly here to say the key is to write down your answers. The more experienced you are as a writer, the more reluctant you will be to do this. But force yourself. Your written plan will be an invaluable reference, saving you dozens of false starts and preventing time-consuming and costly detours. It will help you keep the "forest" in your mind's eye while you're standing up-close to the trees. Don't count on your memory to do this.

THE THREE QUESTIONS YOU NEED TO ASK

So, when you have your paper and pencil poised, or your fingers lined up on the keyboard, here are the three "make a plan" questions to ask:

1. Who is your reader?
2. How many words do you have?
3. What do you want your reader to do?

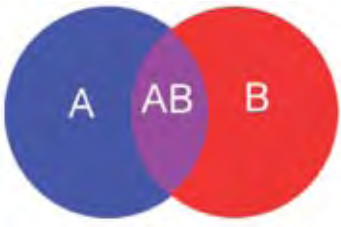
1. Who is your reader?

This sounds basic, but sometimes writers rush right past this question. Don't make that mistake. Recall that room we're pretending to paint? Before getting started, wouldn't you want to know who was going to use it, and for what purpose? If it was a north-facing room, owned by someone who craved light, airy spaces, you wouldn't want to paint it dark brown.

When it comes to writing, ask yourself "Who am I writing for?" Develop a detailed picture of your readers. How old are they and what's their education? Where do they live? What's their work? What's their likely degree of interest in your topic? What information will captivate and be most useful to them?

You may feel daunted if your target audience is large – for example, if you're writing for a general-interest website or a daily newspaper or large-circulation magazine. To make the task more manageable, it can help to try to picture one individual you know well – a friend, colleague, maybe even a sibling – who can act as a representative or surrogate for the group. (This is a variant of the principle used by market research firms – the answers of several hundred people represent the opinions of millions.)

How a Venn diagram can help



As you form this image of your readers, be sure to consider *their* needs rather than your own. When you have something to write, it's easy to make the mistake of focusing on what *you* want to say – forgetting what the reader wants or needs to learn. To prevent this problem, I suggest thinking about a Venn diagram.

Venn diagrams show the meeting place between two groups or ideas. In the illustration above, circle A could represent all the types of food human beings eat. And circle B could represent all the food horses eat. And the part where the two circles overlap (labelled AB) represents all the food that *both* eat – corn, oats and apples, for example.

In writing terms, circle A is what you want to *write* about, circle B is what the reader wants to *read* about, and area AB is where those two interests overlap.

It's not just about you

Let's make this more meaningful with a real-life example. Imagine you're a human resources consultant and you want to write an article about a special tool you've developed for reducing employee turnover.

Of course, *you* want to talk about your tool (and nothing but your tool). But wait! You're writing for in-house HR managers. Aren't they more likely to be interested if you begin by describing the problems *they* face? If you can paint a picture of the true costs of losing employees (and, in graphic detail, all the pain that involves), you're much more likely to engage your readers because they will feel you understand their point of view. Then, and only then, will they be receptive to what *you* want to say.

Understanding your readers and creating a clear picture of them in your mind will help you identify their particular areas of interest, allowing you to make your writing much more compelling and useful to your reader.

2. How many words do you have?

When journalists get assignments from their editors they always ask "What's the word count, boss?" at the beginning of the conversation. This is must-have data – even for self-directed writers who don't need to answer to a supervisor. A word count brings discipline and structure to your writing. It's folly to write without one.

If you don't have a boss giving you a word count goal, be sure to set one for yourself. As you do this, be aware of several important principles.

First, as Andy Rooney says, "Keep in mind that you're more interested in what you have to say than anyone else." This is sage advice. I receive many electronic newsletters each week and many of them are far too long. Brevity is not just the soul of wit – it's the only thing that will get you read in this busy, information-packed era. I think 500 to 1,000 words is about all the average e-newsletter reader is willing to tolerate. And if you're not a sparkling writer, err on the 500-word side.

Second, make sure your topic synchronizes with the word count. I tell all my coaching clients over and over again, "Don't try to write about the Second World War in 500 words." Yet every day I see people attempt the equivalent when they try to write about marketing, or customer service or branding in 500 words. This copy is not only terrible for the reader to read – it is superficial and boring at the same time – it's also extraordinarily painful for the writer to produce. Tackling a topic that's too big for the available word count is like trying to squeeze a chubby rear end into a pair of jeans that's about three sizes too small.

But there is a simple solution. The answer is to focus.

How to find your central argument

Journalists call it an "angle." University professors call it a "thesis statement." I'm going to call it an "argument." Whatever term you choose, remember you should only begin writing when you have one.

What's an argument? The key thing to know is that's it's *not* a *topic*. Many beginning writers (and even some pros) get sucked in to writing about *topics*. This is a mistake. Topics are too big and too boring. They overwhelm. They're hard to organize and make interesting.

Remember high school or college lit class? Imagine you were assigned to write an essay on Shakespeare. How could you possibly begin? To get around this problem, your teacher or professor taught you to zero in on something specific. So, instead of your essay topic being "Shakespeare," it might have been "Shakespeare is the most original playwright who ever lived." Or "Hamlet's greatest crime was his inherent goodness."

Moving from the academic world to the real one, the same theory applies. You must focus on one key argument you want to make. You're allowed to make different *points,* of course. If you're writing a book, for instance, you'll have dozens – maybe even hundreds – of points. But you're allowed only one key argument.

Furthermore, you must capture that argument in no more than 50 words, so you can tape it to your wall and refer to it constantly as you write.

Here are some possible newsletter or e-zine articles. Notice how the argument narrows the topic and provides a point of view.

Anatomy of an argument

You	Your audience	Your topic	Your argument
Research expert	Managers at companies that do market research	Focus groups	Many companies harm their own marketing efforts by misusing focus group data (12 words)
PR consultant	Vegetable growers and manufacturers	Getting more PR	The recent *E. coli* outbreak in spinach gives vegetarian chefs and vegetable producers a chance to promote themselves (17 words)
HR consultant	Managers at firms with at least 5,000 employees	Employee education	Improving employee education programs can reduce employee turnover costs by 70 percent (12 words)
Therapist	Single professionals	Finding a life partner	Many people sabotage their chances of finding a mate by watching too much TV (14 words)
Wine merchant	Foodies and wealthy urban professionals	Champagne	Serving certain specific foods with champagne will help show off the taste of the champagne (15 words)

This same principle of narrowing applies to any writing you do, even book-length writing. You still need one key, boiled-down-to-its-essence argument.

The argument for this e-book is this: Many people dislike writing and find it hard, slow work because they haven't been taught how to do it properly. You can write faster and better if you follow a series of specific

steps, *in a specific order* (38 words). Everything in this book goes back to this simple, 38-word message.

When you've written your argument, print it out and tape it to the wall beside your computer. Referring to it will help you keep your writing on track.

3. What do you want your reader to do?

A final obvious question – but one that writers often miss – is what, exactly, do you want your readers to do? For example, you may want them to buy something that you're selling, to subscribe to a newsletter you're offering, to view you as an expert in your field, or, simply to remember you (so when a big consulting gig comes up three months from now, you're invited to make a proposal).

At other times, you may have a specific cause you want to promote. Perhaps you're an engineer concerned about greenhouse gas emissions and you want people to drive their cars less often. Or maybe you are lobbying your school district to prevent a local school from closing.

Whatever your objective, *write it down* and tape it to the wall beside your central argument. That way, when you've finished your article, report or book, you'll be able to assess how close you've come to achieving your goal.

A final word about timing

If you've never before created a writing plan, the steps might seem time-consuming, even obsessive. Hang in there. As you get practice, you'll be able to make your plan more quickly. I do this sort of planning for everything I write, and for short articles – say, 750 words – it usually takes only a couple of minutes. (When I first started creating plans, it might have taken 10 to 15 minutes.)

Learning the steps in this process is a little bit like learning tennis. The instructor tells you how to the hold the racquet, where to put your feet, how to move your body through space. At first, it's awkward and confusing. But after a while, you absorb the steps and then you're able to concentrate on simply hitting the ball.

In writing, you're not trying to connect with a ball, but with a reader.

STEP 1 ACTION SUMMARY

Start to write only when you have a plan. A small investment in planning time at the beginning of the writing process will save you many hours of time later on.

- First, ask yourself "Who is my reader?"
- Next, ask "How many words do I have?" If no one else has given you the word count, remember Andy Rooney's advice that *you* are more interested in what you have to say than anyone else.
- Finally, ask "What do I want my reader to do?" Be clear about your objective.
- Write down your plan, consisting of a brief reader profile, argument statement (no more than 50 words) and writing objective.
- Remember that planning will become faster and easier with practice.

> “Facts alone are not enough for any piece of writing. As human beings we are hard-wired to find stories fascinating. We want plot. Most of us are more interested in people than in principles. We want to see, in our mind’s eye, what the writer is describing. We want tension and drama. And we want all of these things *even in non-fiction*.”

STEP 2

Research

Research is the process of going up alleys to see if they are blind.

– Marston Bates

I teach writing workshops, and at a recent session one of the participants wanted to talk about research. She said that whenever she worked on an article for her corporate publication, she felt a bit like a detective following a trail of clues. But the problem, she confessed, was that one clue always led to another – and she didn't know when to stop. Even for 500-word pieces, she could devote *hours* to research – checking out the company's Intranet site, ploughing through brochures and annual reports, and clicking on endless Google links.

I understood her problem because I've been there. It's a bit like that joke: "I can spell banana – B-A-N-A-N-A-N-A-N-A-N-A – I just don't know when to stop . . . "

How do you know when you've done enough research? Interestingly, the real problem is less often the *volume* of information and more often the *quality* of it. The challenge is doing research right.

This book started with the premise that you can compare writing with painting. The research stage of writing is a bit like the prepainting task of repairing cracks and sanding. It's a time to fill holes, to make the surface smooth so that when you're ready to apply the paint, it glides on easily. Let's look at this more closely.

Putting the psychology into fact-finding

When you hear the word "research," what springs to mind? Perhaps you picture yourself sitting in a library filled with thousands of books, or maybe you think of a computer screen filled with spreadsheets, or possibly you imagine working your way through a towering stack of journals.

Sure, all these things comprise research. But they are not enough. The traditional five Ws – who, what, when, where, why – reveal only part of the story. You might call this the engineering part, because engineers like facts and figures.

The more fun and interesting part of research – what you might call the psychological part – comes when you explore a different set of questions. I like to describe these as the three Hs, although because they all start with the same word it might be more accurate to call them the three Hows. The questions are: how did it happen, how did you feel about it, and how can you explain it in a metaphor or analogy?

Facts alone are not enough for any piece of writing. As human beings we are hard-wired to find stories fascinating. We want plot. Most of us are more interested in people than in principles. We want to see, in our mind's eye, what the writer is describing. We want tension and drama. And we want all of these things *even in non-fiction*. Getting answers to the three Hows will give your writing the richness, colour and depth that readers demand.

What makes a great quote?

One of the signs you've failed to do enough psychological research is when your quotes read something like this:

"The pipeline goes for four miles and is 24 inches in diameter," said Fred Fleming, vice-president of operations.

Notice how the quote states only facts and doesn't give them in a particularly interesting way. The writer probably asked Fleming, "How big is the pipeline?" Sure, that's important information, but it's not very quotable.

To get quotable material, you need to ask Fleming questions such as "How did it go when you built the pipeline?" or "What sorts of problems did you face along the way?" "Was there ever a time when you felt the project was just going to be impossible to pull off?"

Then you might get an interesting quote, something like "The cold was the worst part. We finally had to set up little tent-like structures around the dang thing so workers could still operate their blowtorches properly."

Take the blank paper challenge

To make the challenge of gathering enough psychological research more graphic, I often ask writers to take a blank piece of paper and draw a line down the middle of the page. One side of the page is reserved for the "facts" they will gather for whatever it is they're writing. The other side is for all the "feelings" – the stories, metaphors and emotional content related to the

topic. I tell them that if they've really finished their research, they should have an almost equal number of words on both sides of the paper. (Many writers discover their page is too heavily weighted to the facts side.)

If you're an experienced corporate communicator or copywriter producing a story or brochure, you'll have already planned to talk to some real people – from vice-presidents to production line workers. This is where you'll collect the stories and emotional content you'll need to write a compelling piece. But beware. Writers sometimes don't mine this field as deeply as they should – they stop the interview before they get to the material they need. (To avoid this problem, see the sidebar on interviewing, page 23.)

If you're an Internet newsletter writer or entrepreneur, the idea of talking to real people may seem strange or unnecessary. And, in fact, you may not have to do "formal" interviews. But you still need stories and examples. You can start by looking at your own life. What's happened to you (or to someone in your family) that can illustrate the point you're trying to make? If that isn't fruitful, move on to your clients. How have you helped them? What problems have they faced? What did you both learn from this? Look for the stories. You may, of course, need to change names to preserve confidentiality, but that's okay. Stories that really happened have a ring of truth to them that your readers will recognize and appreciate.

When you've exhausted these fertile grounds, move on to the public domain. What anecdotes have you read in newspapers, magazines or books that might apply to the article you're trying to write? Be persistent and thorough in your research.

Just as a potter needs clay and a baker needs flour and yeast, so too you need stories, examples and anecdotes as the basis for your writing. Some hard work in collecting this material will save you much grief later. When you finally sit down to write, instead of staring into space or drumming your fingers on the desktop as you wonder what to say, you'll have the raw material you need to write easily and fluently.

How much research is enough?

Going back to the story at the beginning of this chapter about the research-obsessed communicator, let's reconsider how much research is enough. Here are three quick questions you can ask yourself to see if it's time to wrap up your research and move along to the next step in the Publication Coach System:

1. If a friend, partner or colleague grilled you on the topic, could you answer the questions easily and in plain English? (And if you're uncertain, don't just guess – ask some real people to grill you.)

2. Could you write 80 percent (or more) of your piece without doing more research?
3. Do you have enough stories and real-life examples to illustrate the point of your piece?

If you can answer yes to all three of these questions, you have finished your basic research.

That said, don't expect to have 100 percent of the material you need. You simply need *most* of it. After all, it's impossible to predict the twists and turns your article will take when you sit down at the computer. If you discover some gaps in your research later, when you're in the middle of writing, you should simply type in a blank space, like this: _____. Then you can go back and fill in the blank later. (As we'll discuss soon, you should write as quickly as possible and not slow yourself down by stopping to look up facts.)

How to integrate anecdotes into your writing

Several years ago, I wrote a piece on chef Art Smith for the Canadian design magazine *yoursource*. Smith and I lived in different cities, so I didn't have the chance to interview him in person. In fact, he's such a busy guy it was tough just getting him on the phone. I vividly recall keeping him talking as long as possible, desperately trying to extract enough anecdotes to allow me to write an interesting article. As soon as Smith told me about a pivotal chat with an editor friend I thought, "Bingo – there's a story I can use . . . " In fact, it even formed the beginning of my article, as you can see here.

> When the Chicago-based celebrity chef Art Smith won the James Beard prize – the Academy Award of the cooking world – for his gorgeous 2001 book *Back to the Table,* one big problem loomed.
>
> What could he possibly do as an encore?
>
> "After the first book came out, I was cooking in the kitchen with an editor friend," Smith recalls. "We were talking about how I should approach my next book, when I suddenly thought, 'What would Dr. Phil do?'"
>
> Of course, such a question would be natural for Smith, the chef whose job it is to cook meals for Oprah. "Dr. Phil would ask, 'What are your issues? What are your goals?'" . . . .

The art of the interview

Interviewing – and doing it well – is harder than it looks.

Professionals like Diane Sawyer make it look as easy as ordering a drink with their fries. But of course they have assistants to do the tough legwork for them. And the subjects *they're* interviewing are often movie stars or famous authors who are wildly enthusiastic about the publicity they're bound to get.

Fortunately, even if you're not a journalist, you *can* do a lot to improve your interviewing technique. And if you do, the payoff will be enormous – both in terms of the articles you write and the speed with which you're able to write them.

First, remember it's often wise to invest time in selecting your interview subject. True, sometimes the nature of the story may force you to speak with a specific person, no matter how uncharming he or she may be. But if you have choices, use them wisely.

I often telephone supervisors – not to interview them for the story but to identify potential interview subjects in their department. Good supervisors will know the best "talkers" on the floor. Less helpful ones may be able to drop the names of other people with whom I can follow up. Some people are born with the gift of the gab. It's just common sense to interview Chatty Cathy over George Grumpypants.

When you have your subject identified, then it's time to do a little more research. Yes, of course you're pressed for time. But how long does it take to Google a few key phrases? (If you're interviewing someone about power boilers, for example, it helps to have a vague idea what one looks like.)

How to prepare

Writers often ask me if I recommend using a prepared list of questions. The answer is a qualified yes. You want a natural ebb and flow to your conversation. Slavishly following a list of questions will make you feel like a prosecuting attorney – and could put your subject in the unfortunate role of hostile witness. So, sure, prepare your list of questions, but refer to it only when there's a lull (or at the end of the interview – to make sure you've covered everything).

When making your first contact with the subject, be certain to describe the nature of your story. Don't just give the topic – explain *exactly* what you are trying to accomplish. Interview subjects who understand your purpose will be better able to help you.

When you launch the interview it's wise to start with a few pleasantries to relax both of you. But after that, be sure your first questions are factual and easy to answer. This is still time for warming up. Just as a runner doesn't start to sprint without some stretching and a few laps around the track, you shouldn't launch into the important questions until you – and your subject – have warmed up your "talking muscles."

Once you're underway, there are three keys to a successful conversation: ask the right kinds of questions, be friendly and responsive, and try to avoid superlatives.

Ask open-ended rather than "closed" questions

As you know, "closed" questions can be answered with a simple yes or no. Open-ended ones can't. But there's more to it than that. Be sure to go for the deepest level of open-ended questions – that is, questions about *feelings, opinions* and *values*. "How does the power boiler work?" is open-ended, sure, but it's pure fact. "How tough was it to get the new power boiler up and running in time?" or "How did you cope when you thought you wouldn't be able to meet your deadline?" will get you much more interesting answers. During the interview, look for every chance to probe into feelings, opinions and values.

And while you're at it, don't forget to look for *sensory* detail. Ask about what your subject has seen, touched, heard, tasted or smelled.

It's especially useful to ask outright for metaphors. A writer I was working with once needed to describe a hard-to-understand piece of industrial equipment. She asked her source to compare it to something else and he said it was "like a hospital bed because it was flat and it tilted." Perfect!

Be effusive

Your interview subjects – no matter how sophisticated, technically savvy or aloof – are human beings. And they will respond to being treated as ones. When someone tells you something interesting, don't just say "Uh-huh." Say: "Wow! That must have been fascinating/tough/frustrating. How did you feel about that?" This is especially important if you're interviewing by phone, when your subject can't see you smiling or nodding your head.

Another essential interviewing skill is paraphrasing. When the VP tells you about production statistics, respond by putting

her comments in your own words. You might say, for example, "Interesting . . . so you're saying that if the company doesn't dramatically improve its production, then a number of jobs are at risk?"

Paraphrasing not only "primes the pump" for the interview, it also allows you to *prove your understanding* to interviewees. Then they have the opportunity to correct you if you've misunderstood.

In response to your paraphrase, the VP might reply: "Yes. We're like a car that's in the wrong gear going uphill and we're starting to stall," or she might say: "No, I don't want to panic anyone. We don't need to rebuild or re-engineer anything; we just need to do a little tweaking." Bingo, you now understand (and you also have a better quote).

When you can't figure out how to paraphrase, you can also simply repeat the last comment made by your subject, but put a question mark in your voice: "We're like a car that's in the wrong gear going uphill?"

And be sure to remember that silence can be a tool. Western society hates it when people don't talk. So steel yourself to the discomfort, and use it to your advantage. More than likely, you'll find that even reluctant interview subjects will rush to break the silence.

Avoid "superlatives"

How often have you asked any of the following questions: What was the worst buying decision you ever made? What was the hardest part of the product launch? What was the best career advice anyone ever gave you?

All of these questions are based on superlatives – *best, worst, funniest, most embarrassing,* and so on. And they are almost always a mistake.

The questions sound good on paper but they put enormous stress on the interview subject. Thoughts race through the subject's mind as he tries to answer your question about the best career advice. "Hmm," he thinks. "That was *good* advice, but was it the *best?*" Before you know it, you have a tongue-tied subject.

Instead, ask "What's one piece of career advice you've found useful?"

Or tap into the power of the human brain and ask a "when" question. "*When* you were in your very first job, what good career advice did you receive?" Somehow the magic word "when" transports

interview subjects into previous circumstances and dramatically heightens their memories.

Dealing with problem interviews

Not all interviews will go smoothly. But often the problems are predictable and you can prepare for them. One of the most common difficulties is persuading interviewees to stop using jargon. Address it with a little bit of flattery: "You understand this subject at a much greater depth than I do. But I have to write this article at a basic level. Could you pretend I'm a grade 6 student as you explain?" Some self-deprecating humour can also help. I sometimes say: "Just pretend I'm incredibly dense – you won't have to pretend very hard."

If the problem is that your subject rambles, gently draw him back to the topic. You might say: "We've been talking about (topic) and now I need to move on to (another topic)." If you're tight for time, you could mention deadline pressures as a way of speeding up the interview, but try to be kind and patient.

Of course, it's much harder to handle the opposite problem – when a person answers your questions only in monosyllables or says "I dunno" or "Yeah, I guess." This is most often a sign that you're either not providing enough feedback or you're not asking the right questions. Go back to the basics: be enthusiastic, make sure you're paraphrasing, ask for metaphors, and try "when" questions.

How to wrap it up

When you're finished with your questions, be sure to ask if your interviewee has anything to add. Be aware that the end of the interview is ripe with possibilities. Investigative reporters often make a big deal of flipping shut their notebooks, turning off their tape recorders, saying "Thanks very much" – and then *listening like hawks*. That's because the subject will suddenly relax – "Phew, got through that without making any terrible mistakes" – and then start to chat in a frank and far more interesting way. If this happens, thank the interview gods, discreetly open your notebook and start scribbling like crazy. It will be your best material.

An earlier version of this article appeared in the November–December 2006 issue of *Communication World,* the magazine of IABC, the International Association of Business Communicators.

STEP 2 ACTION SUMMARY

- When researching, collect not just facts, but also feelings. Do this by interviewing people or by using anonymous "client stories."
- When you have about 80 percent of the material you need for your piece, go on to step 3, thinking, in the Publication Coach System.
- When interviewing:
  - ask open-ended questions (that can't be answered with a simple yes or no)
  - give the interview subject lots of feedback ("Wow! That must have been exciting/frustrating")
  - avoid superlatives (instead of "What was the best career advice you ever received?" ask "What's one good piece of career advice you've received?")

> “Writing, to be enjoyable,
> needs to be about *discovering*.
> We don’t write what we already know –
> we write in order to learn.
> If you put everything in the neat little boxes
> of an outline, you remove the joy
> of this discovery.”

STEP 3:

Think and Rethink

Action is easy; thought is hard.

– Wilhelm Meister

Incredibly, even after all that planning and research, you're *still* not ready to write. But at least you have advanced to the "thinking" stage. Returning to our metaphor of painting a room, thinking is like stirring your paint to make sure it's properly mixed.

Mixing is a good metaphor here, because it suggests action and movement – both of which are integral to thinking. Trouble is, you'd never realize this from looking at the way most of us try to approach the task.

We perch in front of our computer screen and stare balefully into the flickering light. Or we curl up in the corner chair at a coffee shop, nursing a steaming latte and waiting desperately for inspiring thoughts. I'm not opposed to coffee shops – in fact, I think getting out of the house or office is a great idea. But *sitting* while you're trying to think is usually a mistake. We human beings think best when we're able to move about in some fashion.

Get up off your seat

When I was a young writer, a mentor advised me to place my dictionary across the room. That way, I'd have to get up and walk every time I wanted to check a word (a frequent occurrence for me as I'm a crummy speller). This motion, he told me, would help get my brain in gear. These days, with the allure of spell-check, the dictionary strategy isn't so effective. Instead, I now try to schedule an hour's worth of walking into my working days. In this manner, I have "thought through" countless articles, letters and reports. I not only sort out a plan for my writing, but I often find that entire sentences and paragraphs come effortlessly to mind as I stride through the streets near my house.

In fact, there is some science behind this. According to Dr. Arne Dietrich, a professor of psychology at the American University of Beirut and an expert in the neurobiology of creativity, there's a strong link between

aerobic exercise and creative thinking. Running, in particular, he told *The Writer* magazine (April 2007 edition), keeps the analytical part of the brain busy, freeing up the creative side.

Others say they find the same benefit from washing dishes, driving, taking a shower, grooming the dog or even knitting. It seems that any repetitive motion that occupies one part of your brain helps liberate the "ideas part" to jump into action.

Design a system to capture your ideas

Once you're active, the challenge then becomes capturing those ideas. Your precious thoughts are like cherry blossom petals or dandelion fluff. They are small, fragile and easily scattered – and you need some way to preserve them. When planning your system for capturing ideas, here are three questions to ask yourself:

1. *How do you like to get most of your ideas, and what capturing system would be convenient to use?* For example, if you love to walk, then pick a system that doesn't force you to stop and sit down. I use an inexpensive digital recorder that's the size of a credit card (although a little thicker) and weighs no more than a few ounces. It slips in and out of my pocket easily. But if your ideas come to you in the shower, you'll need another system. I know of someone who bought a diver's slate to deal with that challenge.
2. *What recording system will you most enjoy?* We all resist carrying out tasks we dislike. Don't make this a self-discipline issue. If you're allergic to technology, avoid Palm Pilots and BlackBerrys. Instead, use a pocketful of index cards attached with a binder clip to capture your thoughts. You can sort through and file them easily when you get home. If you hate handwriting or printing (as I do), then select a system that does not require you to handwrite or print. Go digital.
3. *How will you file and find the information you collect?* The best collection system in the world is useless if you fail to refer to it. Think about how you will retrieve your ideas. Some people like using one big fat notebook. Because I'm a person who prefers digital media, I have an "Ideas" folder on my computer's hard drive, subdivided into a number of separate documents. If you misplace something in this system, you can use one of the various search features provided by your computer's operating system or software.

Ideas – whether for a new product, a fresh way of looking at a problem or the exact phrase you need to finish an article you're writing – are a gift. Record them before they slip away.

Why you should resist making an outline

When people start thinking about a piece they need to write, they sometimes feel an overwhelming urge to create an outline. This probably stems from what they were taught in school. I implore you to resist this urge. Outlining is a *terrible* idea, because it taps into the part of your brain that is linear, logical and rule-bound – exactly the part you want to ignore when you're trying to create. (Note: You'll invite this part of your brain back to the party when you reach steps 7 and 8, revising and copy editing.)

Outlining not only puts you in the wrong frame of mind, it also causes your writing to become "disconnected." That's because it turns whatever it is you're writing into a series of sections. This can be useful if you're writing something long – say, more than 5,000 words. But for anything shorter, outlines encourage you to produce a bunch of little pieces of "fabric" – similar to a patchwork quilt, really – which you then have to stitch together. It's a whole bunch easier to get seamless writing if you don't use any seams.

As well, outlining will inevitably turn writing into a *chore*. You know what happens with chores, don't you? You ignore them. You dilly-dally. You feel consumed by guilt. But you still procrastinate. Think about what happens during tax season. You clean the garage. You reorganize your online bookmarks. You tidy the stationery drawer. In short, you do everything other than what you're supposed to do. Psychologists have a term for this phenomenon: *counter-will*. It's the urge inside all of us to respond with a big fat "No! I don't feel like it" when we're told we must do something.

Why would you want to do that to your writing?

Writing is about discovering

Writing, to be enjoyable, needs to be about *discovering*. We don't write what we already know – we write in order to learn. If you put everything in the neat little boxes of an outline, you remove the joy of this discovery.

Have you ever spent any time with a two-year-old learning to put on a sweater or get her mashed potatoes onto a fork? "Me do it," she'll say as she waves away all that annoying adult help. She doesn't want you to *show* her. That will eliminate the fun. She wants to figure it out for herself.

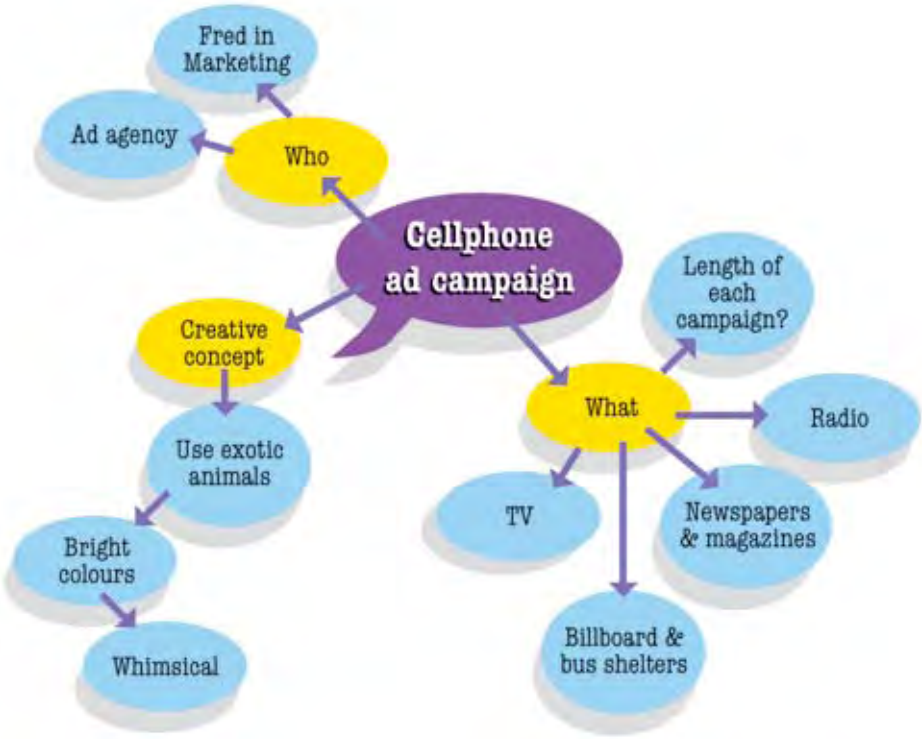
Your creative brain is like that two-year-old. In exchange for the pleasure of figuring things out, it will help you find meaning, see connections and get the words down on paper. But take away the pleasure of discovery (by creating an outline that figures it all out before you write) and your creative brain will shut down. The outline makes it seem as though you don't want a partner – you want a robot, to follow orders. Or maybe a secretary, to take dictation.

The joys of mindmapping

Instead of outlining, I suggest you switch to mindmapping. This technique, which was named and made famous by Tony Buzan, is described in many of his books (see resources). I've also produced a booklet on the subject as it applies to writing. (It's free to anyone who subscribes to my newsletter at www.publicationcoach.com. If you're a subscriber who missed getting a copy, please just drop me a quick e-mail and I'll be happy to send it to you.) Let me highlight the key points here.

A mindmap is a simple visual image of what you're thinking about. To create one, take a blank piece of paper and turn it sideways. Write your topic or central idea in the middle of the paper. For example, if you're writing an article about how to find more clients, you would write "How to find more clients" in the centre. Draw a circle around this phrase or idea. It's good to use different-coloured pens and little drawings to make your mindmap more interesting. (This detail is pleasing to the creative part of your brain.)

Now, just let your mind wander. Each time a word or idea pops into your head, write it down and draw a circle around it. Link it to the word or phrase that inspired the thought by drawing a line to it, as you can see in the illustration.



Mindmapping is similar to brainstorming. You might even want to think of it as brainstorming with yourself. And the same rules apply: don't judge or evaluate, don't organize, don't overanalyze, be creative. Most important, don't limit yourself to the facts. This is where you should capture any and all images, metaphors, stories, examples and pictures that spring to your mind. These will lend colour and authenticity to your writing.

If you feel stumped or have difficulty coming up with enough ideas, try to keep your hand moving. Doodle on the page. Draw pictures. Create circles and leave the insides blank. Eventually, your brain will start giving you what you need. (And if it doesn't, then go for a walk.)

Mindmapping for longer projects

Mindmapping works for writing projects of all sizes – short or long. But if you're faced with a long project, such as a book, it's a good idea to create a number of different mindmaps. When writing this book, for example, I started with a single mindmap for the whole book. Then, each time I started a new chapter, I'd do another mindmap for that one. Sometimes, when I stalled, I'd even create a mindmap for a small section of a chapter.

Breaking writing into chunks like this can be an excellent way of making longer projects less intimidating.

When I started encouraging writers to use mindmaps, I quickly discovered a common error. Many people turned the mindmap into an outline by another name. They painstakingly divided it into sections, carefully making sure they had enough "circles" associated with each main idea. Don't do this. It defeats the purpose of the exercise. A mindmap shouldn't *organize* – instead, its job is to:

- capture your ideas as quickly as possible, so they don't escape
- *inspire* you to write.

Organizing is best left to the editing stage (see step 8).

As you draw your mindmap, here's what will happen. You'll reach a certain point when you think, "Aha, *now* I know what I want to say," or "I really need to write now."

But hang on, first you need to find your lede, as you'll see in the next step of the Publication Coach System.

STEP 3 ACTION SUMMARY

- Thinking is easier if you're moving or doing a repetitive motion – walking, running and even knitting are all helpful.
- Be sure to have a *system* for capturing your ideas. The system should be convenient to use, suit your personality and allow you to retrieve your ideas easily.
- Avoid outlining – it sucks the joy out of writing and turns you into someone who is simply "following orders." This is likely to make you resist writing and to turn your project into a dreaded chore.
- Writing is about discovering. Let your creative brain enjoy the pleasure of making connections and finding meaning before you try to organize the material.
- Use mindmapping – a simple process that I like to call "brainstorming with yourself." List your ideas on paper without judging, evaluating or organizing. Include images, metaphors, stories, examples and illustrations.
- Begin to write only when you think, "Aha, *now* I know what I want to say."

STEP 4:

Find Your Lede

Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.

– Gene Fowler

This is the moment writers both long for and dread: the blank page, the empty screen.

Going back to our painting analogy, you have cleaned and sanded the walls and stirred your paint. Now you're ready to apply the primer coat. This primer is the beginning of your story or article. Journalists call this the "lead" or "lede," which is the spelling I'll use here. (Lede is from archaic English, and I prefer it because it prevents confusion with the other meanings of the word.)

Painters know that a poor primer coat means a bad final paint job. Similarly, a weak lede almost always leads to anemic writing. True, sometimes you can fix your lede later, but I've found it's usually better to invest significant time in figuring out a strong lede up front. After I've done that, it seems the rest of the story almost always "writes itself."

Why you don't need to summarize

Beginning writers sometimes imagine the lede must offer a summary or overview statement. This mistaken belief probably comes from high school or college teachers.

Keep in mind, however, that high school and college teachers were paid to read students' work. (Think about how that dynamic changes the reader-writer relationship.) Once out of school, however, writers must meet the demands of the marketplace. Is the writing interesting? Does it draw in the reader? Will busy, distracted people *want* to read the work? Trouble is, summary ledes are often boring.

"But," I hear you protesting, "my daily newspaper is filled with summary ledes." Yes, true enough. And perhaps that's one of the many reasons newspaper readership has dropped like an anchor in the past forty years. To address this problem, the Associated Press (a service that supplies stories to media outlets) has started to provide duplicates of stories – with

different ledes. One is a traditional summary-style lede while the other offers more of a story.

When I coach writers, I suggest they ask themselves one essential question before starting to write: "What is the most *fascinating* way I could begin?" I like the word "fascinating" because it underlines the need to focus on the reader's state of mind rather than your own desire to communicate *x* amount of knowledge.

Your goal as a writer may be to communicate certain key facts or to make a point, but remember this: if your reader doesn't read what you've written, then all your efforts have been wasted.

You have one chance to make a first impression

Your reader is a bit like a shopper walking into a store. Shoppers notice whether the store is clean, comfortable and well lit. Then they consider the ambience of the room and the friendliness of the staff. Finally, they pass judgment on the merchandise – does the store have what they're looking for? Is it well made and fairly priced? Based on all of these rapid-fire impressions, they either start to shop or leave immediately.

Similarly, your readers will form an instant impression of your writing – based on the lede. Don't give them an excuse to leave. Create a compelling first impression. Give them a lede that is not only friendly and interesting, but also *fascinating*.

Years as a journalist have taught me that finding a good lede is one of the hardest tasks of writing. But being a journalist has also taught me to take a systematic approach to the challenge.

A Rolodex of ledes

Rather than waiting for inspiration, you can run through a mental Rolodex of ledes – as calmly as you might consider the cereal choices at your local grocery store. The question isn't "What on earth am I going to eat for breakfast?" Instead it becomes "Do I want Shredded Wheat, Cheerios or Cornflakes?"

Likewise, don't ask yourself "How am I going to begin my article?" Instead, run through all the possibilities (see list, page 37) one at a time, and ponder your options. Begin by asking yourself "If I were to start with lede type #1 (anecdotal), what story would I use?" Then move on to lede type #2 (imaginary story) and ask yourself the same question. When you've run through your Rolodex, your job is simply to pick the most effective one.

In the same way that the Publication Coach System gives you a series of steps for tackling writing, this list of ledes gives you an organized and methodical way of beginning your writing. It becomes a process you can control.

THE ROLODEX OF LEDES

1. The true story or anecdote
2. The imaginary story or anecdote
3. The analogy, metaphor or simile
4. The interesting fact
5. The gallery
6. The information-withheld
7. The wordplay
8. The question
9. The quote

Let's look at these choices in more detail. (Readers of my weekly *Power Writing* newsletter will likely recognize many of the illustrations shown.)

1. The true story or anecdote

Human beings love stories; it's in our DNA. Remember being a little kid and hearing fairy tales? Weren't you just aching to know how the knight would slay the dragon? Throughout human history our storytellers have been some of the most revered members of society. When our ancestors sat around the fire in their cave, I'm sure they told each other stories to pass the time. And I bet those stories were almost always about other people.

Illustration: My late mother was an artist. As a young woman she studied ceramics, and she often told the story of working under a Japanese master craftsman. She would turn out pot after pot on the wheel for him to inspect. He would look them over and then, solemnly, take a piece of wire and cut through each piece looking for air bubbles or other flaws. This would destroy the pot. The craftsman assured my mother the painful step couldn't be avoided. She hated it. But she persevered. And she became a brilliant potter.

Illustration: When I was a daily newspaper editor, one of the reporters in my department liked to play a little game with me. Here's how it went: He tried to use the word "hilarious" at least once in every story he wrote. And every time he used it, I would carefully remove it. This little running gag was a bit of harmless fun. But sometimes it's no joke – we overuse words unintentionally. So here's my question for you: Are you repeating words without even knowing it?

Caution: The biggest problem with the story or anecdotal lede is moving into the rest of the article. Many writers have difficulty with this transition. The story is engaging and interesting – but as soon as the

writer gets to his or her point, the tone of the article changes and it becomes dull and boring. It's almost as though the writer says: "Phew, I got that anecdote out of the way. Now I can move on to the real point of my article."

When I coach writers, I ask them to read articles in newsmagazines, such as *Time* or *Newsweek,* looking specifically at how the author has incorporated the beginning anecdote into the rest of the story. When they do this, light bulbs go on. Students tell me they suddenly understand why they've always had difficulty finishing articles in these magazines. It's because the authors often *fail* to provide an adequate transition between the introductory anecdote and the rest of the article.

Be warned: for the reader, the *story* is the most interesting part of your writing. Strive to make the transition to the rest of your text seamless. The story should not feel like a prefix that's been "tacked on," to dupe people into reading. It should be natural, and the rest of the writing must flow from it. Sometimes you can weave the same anecdote through the article from beginning to end. In other cases, you might want to move on to other anecdotes. However you do it, don't start with a great story and end with a boring recital of facts.

Parting thought: The true story or anecdote lede should be your first choice whenever possible. It's the one most likely to appeal to readers, and it will stop you from becoming too esoteric or theoretical. Real-life examples are the most interesting, persuasive material you can possibly give your readers.

2. The imaginary story or anecdote

Sometimes you just don't have a story to illustrate the point you need to make. If that's your predicament, feel free to invent a story. The value is not that the incident actually happened; the value is that it *could* happen. And, of course, that it is interesting.

Illustration: You feel the weight of a dozen heavy textbooks pressing down on the backpack slung over your shoulder. You hear the scritch-scratch of chalk on the board and the hum of fluorescent lights overhead. You smell the stinky gym shoes and abandoned orange peels left in someone's desk. Where are you? Why, you're back in grade 10. And there is your teacher at the blackboard – Mr. Beckman or Miss Kamali or Sister Mary Rosa – rambling on and on about . . . outlines. They describe why you should never write any essay without one. They explain how outlines will help make you better organized and a better human being. And, most convincingly,

they argue that outlines will help you get that A+ grade you desperately need to get into college. It was persuasive stuff. Except for one little problem. Your teachers were wrong.

Caution: Be honest with your readers. Don't try to pass off a made-up anecdote, an apocryphal tale or a composite story as something that really happened. Make it clear to the reader what you're doing.

3. The analogy, metaphor or simile

Metaphors are a literary device in which the writer compares two dissimilar items. For example, in the illustration below, riding in a helicopter is compared to writing. Metaphors work because the reader responds on a "gut" rather than an intellectual level. As metaphorian Anne Miller explains it: "The dirty little secret about the human brain is that, despite its phenomenal evolution from little more than an olfactory knob, it's still wired to respond more to the emotional than to the cognitive, more to the visual than to the verbal. . . . As wonderfully rational as we are, as incredibly computer-like our minds, our brains crave pictures the way a child craves candy." (I provide an interview with Anne later in this book.)

Illustration: Let's go for a little helicopter ride, shall we? We start by walking toward the stinking, whirling beast. . . . *Whappa, whappa, whappa.* Our hair is whipped round our faces and we instinctively duck to protect our necks as we walk under the madly spinning blades. We scramble inside the door, stow our briefcases under the seats and pop on a pair of noise-cancelling headphones. Phew! As soon as the pilot takes off, we look out the window to see houses and cars and treetops. At first, they're life-sized. But as the helicopter starts to rise, they become smaller and smaller. Eventually we start to see patterns. The landscape stretches out below us like a quilt. There are patches of green – forest – and swaths of yellow – grain. When you write, you are like that helicopter passenger. And what you see from that metaphorical window is what you need to describe to your readers. . . .

Illustration: Have you ever encountered a four-year-old who hasn't eaten enough? It's not pretty. It almost always involves a tantrum with screaming and tears – and maybe even kicking and punching. But offer some apple juice, Goldfish crackers and a cheese string and, voilà, the problem is usually solved. Writers' hissy fits aren't nearly as dramatic, but they are painful in their own unique way. They may involve throwing pencils across the desk, slamming drawers, staring endlessly at a blank screen, and entertaining fantasies of another

career – something fun, like, say, forensic accounting. Of course, a quick glug of apple juice won't solve this kind of problem. . . .

Caution: Don't overreach with your metaphors. They must be believable and they must make sense. When I worked as a newspaper editor, a junior reporter once handed in a review that compared a ballet dance to a plate of spaghetti. Yes, this was an original image. But the reporter's notion – that the dance was "jumbled" in the same way spaghetti is jumbled on a plate – just wasn't obvious enough. A good metaphor should make the reader instantly say "Aha!" If it leaves the reader confused and saying "Huh?" it has failed.

4. The interesting fact

The wild success of Trivial Pursuit and the game show *Jeopardy!* proves that we human beings are hard-wired to like obscure facts almost as much as we like anecdotes. Sometimes one of these can be enough to begin a story.

Illustration: I live in Vancouver, an exceptionally rainy city. We get about 181 millimetres (7 inches) of rain in a typical November – but this year has been anything but typical. By *mid-month* we'd already hit more than 236 millimetres (9.3 inches). And I felt as if half of it had fallen directly on me.

Illustration: The English language has two to three times more words than any other Western language. We have a surfeit of words because English is a mixture of so many languages. Its roots include the dialects of three Germanic tribes (the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes), Latin (from the clergy) and French (from the Normans).

Our words from French and Latin often apply to concepts and ideas. If you stumbled over the word "surfeit" in the previous sentence, that's probably because it is from the Old French word *sorfeit,* meaning "to overdo." (If I'd replaced "surfeit" with "too many," the meaning would have been the same and the phrase would have been more understandable to more readers.) Many words of French and Latin origin can be spotted by their endings – *ence, ity, ion, ly* and *ous.* They are abstract words and they usually don't give you a visual image when you read them.

Caution: The big danger with the interesting-fact lede is that it may feel tacked on. This lede can be a bit like the joke that begins a bad after-dinner speech. The speaker then launches into a boring, rambling speech. But the listeners are not fooled. They know that the joke was a mere prefix. To avoid this response from readers, you must *integrate* your "interesting fact" into the rest of the story. Otherwise, your readers may feel ripped off.

5. The gallery

The gallery lede works for the same reason a teenage girl's nagging works – overload. This lede builds its case by giving three or more examples of the point the writer wants to make. Probably the most puzzling aspect of this lede is its name. It's called a gallery because you line up your points like pictures on the wall. Often (although not always) you'll do this with bullets, as in the illustration below.

Illustration:

- The artwork of M.C. Escher shows strange and compelling worlds in which staircases appear to go nowhere and people "sit" upside down or sideways.
- The plywood pillar at your local museum is painted a creamy, mottled white, with deep grey veins and other flaws so it looks like real marble.
- When you put your dinner on a 12-inch plate instead of a 17-inch one, you eat less food and feel more satisfied by it.

What do these three facts have in common? They are all optical illusions. Illusions are important in writing, too. A piece that looks great will read better than one that is visually dull or confusing.

Caution: Make sure the items in your gallery are points that your readers care about. If your gallery items are all Andy Warhols and your audience prefers Renoir, well, the lede is just not going to work.

6. The information-withheld

Sometimes known as a "tease," this lede withholds a key piece of information. In this way, or so the theory goes, the reader is compelled to continue reading, to discover the missing or surprising piece of information.

Illustration: Things looked serious at the Kamloops Cellulose Fibres mill on Sept. 15. Two employees appeared to have been exposed to chlorine dioxide and they had to be treated and the mill evacuated. Fortunately, it wasn't a real emergency . . .

Illustration: Some 1,800 websites have been created over the past two years in this one room . . .

Caution: A tease succeeds only if people already care about the subject. The first illustration worked only because the target audience consisted solely of people who lived and worked in Kamloops, a small town in the interior of British Columbia. (Non-residents of Kamloops wouldn't give a darn about this story.) The second illustration is more likely to intrigue a wider audience. What room? Where is it? Why were so many websites created there?

7. The wordplay

I'm sometimes called a word geek – a label I don't mind, which probably cements my geeky status. Still, I must confess I have a hard time warming to the wordplay lede. This is probably because it so often depends on a pun, the Kmart of humour.

Illustration: The Bean Education & Awareness Network (BEAN) provides advice, recipes and cooking tips for anyone contemplating moving toward a more meatless lifestyle. You might call the humble legume the bean of their existence.

Caution: This type of lede presents the same challenge as the interesting-fact lede – it's likely to feel tacked on rather than integral to the story. And then there's the pun problem . . .

8. The question

This lede, while potentially powerful, is a bit like a loaded gun – it's as easy to shoot yourself in the foot as it is to hit the target. When using this lede, never ask a question that can be answered by "No," "I don't know," or "Who cares?" Examine the illustrations below and see how they are carefully crafted to resonate with a specific audience; both went to readers who had signed up for a newsletter about writing. Neither lede would be suitable for a more general audience.

Illustration: Do you often write articles that are longer than you intend them to be? Then do you wring your hands as you're faced with the impossible task of cutting them? It doesn't have to be this way.

Illustration: Do you ever need to *describe* something in a story or an article that you're writing? Of course you do. Description isn't just the responsibility of the short story or novel writer. As a business communicator you may need to describe a piece of equipment, a process or a workplace. And if you're writing a profile, you'll also want to describe the person you're interviewing.

Caution: Question ledes go wrong when the question is too broad or too uninteresting. Here are some examples:

- Have you always wanted to climb Everest? (Unless your audience consists of climbing wannabes, there's a good chance that many readers will say no and stop reading.)
- Did you know that Radio XYZ is the leading soft rock radio station in our market? (If your readers aren't interested in soft rock, they aren't likely to know this fact and aren't likely to care.)
- What's the major reason you should floss your teeth after brushing every night? (Even though almost all your readers will have teeth, why should they care?)

Although the question lede can be an easy way into a story, use it only when you're certain the question will engage your readers. And try not to use it too often.

9. The quote

There are some solid reasons for quoting a "wise" person in your lede. The quote may be more interesting, profound or sophisticated than something you could invent yourself. Quoting someone famous may help give your writing "social proof." That is, it may allow you to look good by bathing in the reflected light of someone already well known in your field. Finally, using someone else's wording and syntax will help add variety to your writing.

Illustration: The charming quote "I'm sorry to have written you such a long letter – I didn't have time to write a short one" has been variously attributed to a Chinese scholar, Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, George Bernard Shaw, Voltaire, John Steinbeck and Blaise Pascal. Now I'm not foolish enough to enter the argument about who said it first. But I will say this: it's utter nonsense.

Illustration: Mark Twain once famously said: "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter – it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."

At first, you might think, as I did, that Twain was talking simply about the importance of choosing just the right synonym – for example, that you shouldn't use the word "fatigued" when you want to say "exhausted." But I've recently had cause to assign a whole different meaning to the quote. . . .

Caution: I see too many quote ledes in which the writer has made no effort to tie the quote into the rest of the article. Instead it just sits there at the top (usually set off in italics). Please, if you are going to use a quote in your lede, make an effort to *integrate* it. The illustrations above show that this is not difficult to do. Essentially, you just need to use your own words to introduce the quote.

By the way, the quotes about writing I've used to introduce each chapter in this book do *not* act as ledes. They are not there to "draw you into" the text; they are merely a fillip – a decoration or bonus (also known as an epigraph). It's perfectly fine to use quotes in this fashion – as long as you don't expect them to perform the heavy lifting required of an effective lede.

STEP 4 ACTION SUMMARY

- If you invest time in developing a strong lede, you're likely to find the rest of the story will "write itself."
- You do not have to begin with a summary or overview statement.
- Ask yourself "What's the most *fascinating* way I could begin?"
- To write an effective lede, go through the Publication Coach System's Rolodex of ledes, apply each to your story, then pick the best one:
  1. The true story or anecdote
  2. The imaginary story or anecdote
  3. The analogy, metaphor or simile
  4. The interesting fact
  5. The gallery
  6. The information-withheld
  7. The wordplay
  8. The question
  9. The quote

STEP 5:

Write

Perfection is terrible;
it cannot have children.

– Sylvia Plath

At last! You're now at the step where you can write. Ironically, this chapter is not particularly long. That's because the act of writing is not nearly as complicated as we like to imagine. Instead, as with painting, the difficult work is in the preparing and cleaning up stages. (In writing terms, those are the thinking and editing steps.)

The number 1 mistake people make when they write is that they mix up writing and editing. I'll go into this in more depth in a moment; for now let me admit that this is a hard habit to break. But break it you must.

What the movies taught us about writing

In the days before personal computers, filmmakers often symbolized writing by showing a piece of paper being rolled into a typewriter and a pair of hands pounding at the keyboard. Then you'd hear the paper being ripped from the cartridge, and you'd see it crumpled into a ball and thrown into the wastebasket. After a few moments and the essential bit of mood music, you'd hear the sound of more frantic typing and the camera would pan to a mountain of crumpled paper balls lying around the garbage can. *That* was writing.

No wonder those film noir characters had to drink. Writing in this manner is miserable – a recipe for becoming blocked. This is because you cannot effectively "create" and "judge" your work at the same time. To write quickly and easily, you need to separate writing from editing. Starting to edit while you write is like trying to wash the dishes while you're still eating dinner – or trying to do touch-ups when you haven't even finished painting the room.

The writing brain versus the editing brain

The concept of separating writing from editing – which is fundamental to the Publication Coach System – comes from an understanding of how the brain works. Our amazing brains appear to be divided into

"compartments." (Scientists used to talk about left and right brains, but new research seems to show the brain is more malleable than that.) One of these compartments excels at dreaming up ideas, inventing metaphors and making connections. Another compartment's strong suit is organizing, being logical and following rules.

In short, you have a writing brain and an editing brain. But here's the deal: they're like drivers sharing a road trip. Only one can be behind the wheel at a time. If you let your editing brain start to drive, your writing brain must move to the backseat – and in so doing, it loses the ability to choose your route.

While you are trying to write, you want your writing brain to be fully engaged and the only one in charge. That means no criticizing, no judging, no evaluating. Just writing.

Watch the way you talk to yourself

Sometimes our "talk" gets in the way of our writing.

Psychologists know that we're all constantly talking to ourselves. There's an endless stream of chatter running through our brains all the time: "What am I going to have for dinner tonight?" or "Do I look fat in these pants?" or "Did I really just make that stupid comment?" And on and on it goes. The only people who can escape this prattle, it seems, are those who meditate.

But you don't have to become a yogi to do something about your writing self-talk. You can start by simply recognizing its different guises.

Negative self-chatter

When it comes to writing, negative self-talk is the voice in your head saying things like the following:

- You're a crummy writer.
- This isn't good enough.
- You'll *never* be good enough.
- What makes you think you can write, anyway?
- Why are you even bothering with this?

It's remarkable how this voice takes malicious glee in focusing on the negative. If your writing is slower than you'd like it to be, or especially if it starts to slow down after you've been writing a while, use one of the following five strategies to put your better self back in charge:

Just say no: When the voice starts to tell you you're a crummy writer, yell (silently, in your mind) "Stop!" Shake your head, shrug your shoulders. You can also put elastic on your wrist that you snap every time you hear the negative chatter.

Negotiate: When the voice says your writing is boring, respond: "Thank you for sharing, but I don't have time to deal with this right now." If you're feeling generous, you might add: "I'll think about it later when I'm not so busy writing."

Agree: Have you ever noticed how easy it is to disarm people when you suddenly and unexpectedly agree with them? It takes the wind right out of their sails and they tend to become silent. Say to your voice: "Yeah, you're probably right; I'm a crummy writer. But do you know what? I'm going to finish this writing anyway." Then do it.

Argue: Notice how so many of the comments this voice makes are absolutes and exaggerations: "You always have trouble beginning articles" or "Why do you never write anything that grabs the reader?" Challenge those words "always" and "never." Think of instances when they were clearly untrue. And use that understanding to disempower the chatter.

Replace: This is the most fun step of all. Give your voice an alter ego – a little white angel. And for every nasty comment the devil makes, have your angel say the opposite. If the voice whispers: "You're a crummy writer," your angel should reply: "You're a brilliant writer." It doesn't matter whether you believe this is true. Be bold!

Parting thought: Not every one of these strategies will suit every writer. And some of you may wish to use more than one. Do what works.

"Helpful" self-chatter

Another type of talk will also hurt your writing. I call it "helpful" self-chatter. But observe the quote marks. It's just as bad as negative self-chatter – only sneakier. It makes comments like the following:

- With a bit of work, I could make that last sentence so much clearer.
- Wow, that was such an *obvious* word; I can do better than that!
- I need to stop and think about how I'm going to make a transition from this thought to the next one.
- Writing takes lots of work – if I just fiddle with this paragraph a bit right now, I'll save myself so much time at the editing stage.

And on and on. A certain type of writer (and I put myself in this camp) finds editing not only easier but so much more fun than writing. So it's hugely tempting to *edit all the time*. Why wait? You know you can make the sentence better. And making it better will help you write a more profound, more connected, more interesting next sentence, right? Therefore, isn't it better and more efficient to fix problems *now*?

Ummm, no. The problem, again, is the conflict between the writing and the editing brain. Only one can be in the driver's seat at a time. If you turn over the wheel to your bossy editing brain, which finds being "in charge" so utterly irresistible, your writing brain will quietly slink to the backseat and go to sleep. That means you'll stop getting fresh ideas, making new connections or producing new understandings. As a result, your writing will slow and then, finally, stop.

Perfectionism – which is the source of this problem – is the enemy of fast writing. To write quickly, you need to give yourself permission to write garbage. Lower your standards. In fact, get them down into the basement. This is not the time to worry about quality (you'll get to that later, when you edit). When you are after now is quantity. If this seems an impossible goal because you are a hard-core, dyed-in-the-wool perfectionist, I have two tips:

1. Write in the morning, upon waking. The editing brain is usually slower to arise than the writing brain. (I don't mean you have to get up at 5:00 a.m. or anything. Just write when you first wake up in the morning, whatever time that is.)
2. Turn off your screen, so it becomes impossible for you to edit while you write. I have a laptop hooked up to an extended keyboard and when I'm having difficulty writing quickly, I tip the screen down so I can't see it. If you have a full-sized computer, turn off the monitor. What you can't see won't tempt you.

Write as fast as you can

I know this is going to sound like a Zen koan, but the secret to writing quickly is to write quickly. It's a mindset. Let me give you an analogy. Did you know many people believed that running a four-minute mile was impossible until Roger Bannister did it in 1954? Since then, a four-minute mile doesn't even qualify you for the Olympics – in fact, it doesn't even raise eyebrows. Likewise, if you believe writing quickly is an impossible feat, you won't be able to do it. First, you need to *believe*. Then you need to let yourself do it.

It is easier to write quickly if you don't imagine that you must be somehow "different" when writing – you know, smarter, more educated, more sophisticated. It's always a bad idea to pretend to be something you aren't, but it's especially harmful when writing. Be yourself. Write in a conversational way. If you overthink, try too hard or try to sound like someone you're not, you'll be slower – and, often, the product will be worse. As Elmore Leonard said: "If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it."

Whatever you do, don't stop

As you write, you may find there are small holes in your research. You need to check the spelling of someone's name. You must confirm a date. You have to verify a book or song title. At all costs, don't stop your writing to do this secretarial work. You want to keep your fingers flying across the keyboard as quickly as possible. Instead, insert some shorthand into your article that will remind you to check later. If there's a spelling problem, write <sp?> after the word. If there's a fact you need to confirm, write <CHECK THIS>.

This theory applies to missing words, too. If I'm struggling for just the right word and don't want to get bogged down, I'll write XXXXXX in the space where the word belongs. Similarly, if I need another example or anecdote to flesh out a piece, I'll write <INSERT ANOTHER EXAMPLE HERE>.

The objective is to keep the words spilling onto the page. What you want is momentum. Sometimes writing feels like pushing a car uphill. But when the car is kicked into gear on the open highway, then you want to drive it as long as you can. Don't stop if you can help it.

Take advantage of flow

Flow is that magical state in which words come easily and quickly. You can concentrate, shutting out everything else that's going on around you. In fact, you aren't even fully aware of time passing. You've almost certainly experienced flow – although perhaps not recognized it by name – while talking with a friend, reading a book or playing a sport.

I wish I could tell you that flow could be turned on at will, as easily as you turn on the tap in the bathroom sink. Sadly, it doesn't work that way. But you can help encourage writing flow by creating the circumstances in which it thrives.

First, don't stint on steps 1 through 4 of the Publication Coach System. Devoting a generous chunk of time to planning before you sit down to write will help set you up for flow.

Second, when you are writing, watch for the self-chatter I outlined above and deal with it. Don't let it take over your subconscious – it has no right to be there.

Finally, concentrate intensely on what you are writing. Just as when playing tennis you need to zero in on the bouncing yellow ball, so when writing, you need to focus your mind on nothing but the thoughts and ideas you are trying to communicate.

Write in small bursts of time

Don't limit yourself by thinking it's unproductive to write in 10-minute morsels. You can write little bits *anywhere* – while on a bus, in a coffee shop, at your kitchen table, in a library, in your office waiting for a phone call. If your handwriting is illegible, you may need to drag a laptop around with you, but you can also scribble in notebooks or on little slips of paper, or talk into a digital recorder.

It's a cornerstone of the Publication Coach System that you don't need a minimum of an hour at a stretch to achieve something productive. For example, I have just been writing for nine minutes and I've produced 400 words. "But you're a professional writer," you might argue. Fair enough. But let's say you do only half that – 200 words. That may sound like an unacceptably small number to you. But if you did that three times during a single day, you'd have 600 words – a short article. If you did that every day for a week (working only weekdays), you'd have 3,000 words. And at the end of a year, even allowing for four weeks of holidays, you'd have 144,000 words – more than enough for a full-length book.

Writing in 10-minute bursts will make writing seem less intimidating. After all, you can tolerate just about anything for 10 minutes, can't you? Let your writing accumulate gradually, like snow building up on the deck during a winter storm.

If you want to be a better writer, you simply have to do it. Just as every runner doesn't become an Olympic athlete, you might not become a famous author. But just like anyone who runs daily, you will get better. And faster.

STEP 5 ACTION SUMMARY

- Don't mix editing with writing; you cannot effectively "create" and "judge" your work at the same time.
- Watch for your negative self-chatter and deal with it by saying no, negotiating, agreeing, arguing or replacing it.
- Watch for your "helpful" self-chatter and deal with it by reminding yourself to write first and edit later. If this is hard for you, write when you first wake up in the morning or turn off your screen so you can't see what you're writing.
- Always write as fast as you can, without stopping to correct spelling or check facts. Insert XXXXXs or blanks into your document to mark problem areas or information you want to check or add later.
- Give yourself permission to write "garbage," secure in the understanding you will have plenty of time to clean it up later.
- Write in small bursts of time. Even 10 minutes should allow you to write about 200 words. If you do that three times in a day, you'll have a short article by the end of the day. Do that for a year and you'll have written a book.

> To edit or polish your piece effectively, you need to *think like a reader*. That's why incubating is so essential. It allows you to gain some distance from your work and come to the writing fresh. With the benefit of this extra time, you will be able to spot problems your eyes had glided over because you were too familiar with what you had written.

STEP 6:

Let It Incubate

I've seldom seen a piece of prose, or a poem – my own or anyone else's – that couldn't be improved upon if it were left alone for a time.

– Raymond Carver

Congratulations. You've finished painting your room – you've completed your rough draft. Now, like any master craftsperson, you need to walk away and let the paint dry.

You wouldn't try to put on a second coat while the first one was wet, would you? Similarly, with writing, you shouldn't start editing until your first draft has had time to sit for a while. Writers use various metaphors to describe this time – cooking, setting, resting and incubating. But whatever you call it, remember that this period of "doing nothing" isn't a luxury – it's an essential part of the Publication Coach System.

It would be great to have an exact formula for *how long* you need to wait – but it's not that simple. I can, however, give you some general principles.

Guidelines for incubating

- Your writing needs to rest for *at least* one day – longer is better.
- The more complicated or important the piece of writing, the greater the incubation time it needs.
- The longer the piece of writing, the longer it needs to rest. A 750-word article may be fine sitting for just a day, but a book-length manuscript requires more time. If you don't have a "hot topic" that must be rushed into print, I'd give it at least a couple of weeks. A month or more would be even better.
- Pieces of writing with which you're more emotionally involved need longer incubating times. (This is similar to the common-sense advice that when you write an angry letter or e-mail, you should "sleep on it" before sending it out.)
- When agreeing to deadlines, be sure to allow for the necessary incubating time.
- If you "run out of time" for incubating, have someone else read your work. This is not ideal, but it's better than nothing.

To understand why incubating time is so important, think of the difference in perspective between you and your reader:

Your perspective on your work (or lack thereof)

You have selected a topic to write about. You have researched it (or, if the topic is related to your career, perhaps you have even spent a lifetime researching and learning). You have thought about and planned how you are going to write the article. You have carefully developed a compelling beginning. And you have spilled your thoughts onto the page by telling stories and anecdotes culled from your research and your own experience. You have finished your writing and as you reread it, the words trip off your tongue. Face it, you can almost recite the entire article in your head.

Your readers' perspective (or Why your readers care less than you)

Your readers, who might otherwise be playing golf, feeding the kids, flipping through a glossy magazine or zoning out in front of the TV, instead decide to sit down to read your writing. Although interested in the topic, they have never before devoted any time to studying it. Each anecdote you tell and idea you express is "new." When reading your analysis or leaps of logic, your readers must think carefully to decide whether they agree with you. At times, some of your logic may be confusing or hard to understand. "Hey, this is work," think your readers. "I'm tired now. Maybe I'll come back and finish reading this when I have more energy and my brain is working better."

The return of the Venn diagram

In step 1, I talked about the Venn diagram. This is the time to reconsider it. Remember, you want your article to rest in the *centre* of the diagram – where your interests intersect with your readers' interests. To edit or polish your piece effectively, you need to *think like a reader.* That's why incubating is so essential. It allows you to gain some distance from your work and come to the writing fresh.

With the benefit of this extra time, you will be able to spot problems your eyes had glided over because you were too familiar with what you had written. Suddenly, you will see missing words, repeated words, spelling errors and grammatical mistakes. But even more importantly, you will be able to discover the gaps in your logic. The too-quick explanations. The boring parts. And the murky bits.

Moving beyond the first draft

In the first draft, you may have taken the easy or obvious approach to your topic. But if you set that draft aside for a while, you're able to see alternatives – approaches that are both more interesting and more subtle. This is not to say you wasted your time. In fact, it is the very act of preparing this first draft – and setting it aside for a while – that gives you the perspective to do the necessary revision. Note the root of that word: re-vision. This is the topic of the next chapter.

STEP 6 ACTION SUMMARY

- When you've finished your first draft, it's essential to let your work sit and incubate for at least a day.
- Longer, more complicated or more emotionally resonant pieces of writing require longer incubating times.
- Allow for this incubating time not only when you are planning your schedule for a piece of writing, but also when you are agreeing to deadlines.
- When you return to your piece of writing, try to adopt your readers' perspective.

STEP 7:

Revise

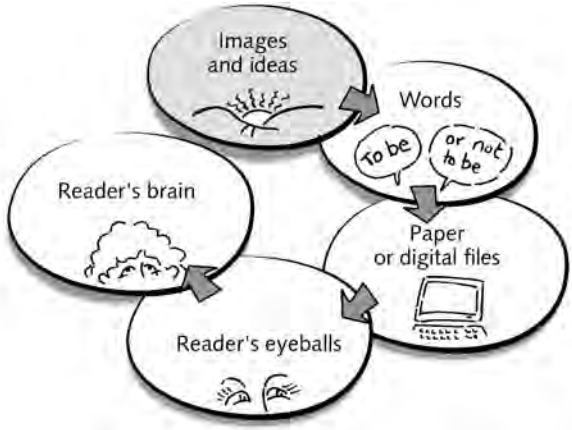
This is what I find most encouraging about the writing trades: They allow mediocre people who are patient and industrious to revise their stupidity, to edit themselves into something like intelligence.

– Kurt Vonnegut

You've finished painting – you know what happens next. You stand back and cast a critical eye over the entire room. "Wow!" you sometimes say. "That looks great!" But at other times you mutter, "The old paint is still showing through – this whole room needs another coat." And at still other times you are left with the stunning and depressing thought that the colour is utterly wrong and can only conclude, "I need to repaint the whole room in a different shade."

Revising, also known as substantive editing, is a step that some writers omit. Instead, they skip directly to copy editing, which involves fixing grammar and spelling and improving fluency. (This is step 8 of the Publication Coach System.) But substantive editing is a step you shouldn't miss. It means looking at your piece both as a whole and line by line. Does it make sense? Is it logical? Do you make your points persuasively? Is the tone correct (informal versus formal or aggressive versus mild) for the effect you are trying to achieve? And, yes, substantive editing sometimes leads to a complete rewrite.

When you write, the message you want to get across to your readers is likely to become distorted. Consider the path:



Your readers don't know what you know. When you spilled your words onto the page, you did it from your own knowledge – based on what you already understood and what interested and excited you. Now is the time for sober thinking. What do your *readers* need to know? And, most importantly, *in what order* do they need to learn it?

As you, the writer, became immersed in your subject (whether through research or life experience), you started to "understand" so many of its finer points. For example, if you were writing about Thai cooking, you would have learned that it's based on five flavours – spicy, sour, sweet, salty and bitter. This fundamental principle would have informed everything you read and, now, everything you write about Thai cooking. But if this principle is new *to your reader* then you need to explain it, somewhere near the beginning of the article.

Your writing brain loves to go off on tangents. In your first draft you will have included unnecessary information – stuff that falls into the category of nice to know but not essential. Your readers are busy and pressed for time. They don't care about your subject as much as you do. Don't annoy them; stay focused.

How to start editing

To begin a substantive edit, I read the whole piece (or, if it's a book, a whole chapter) keeping the following questions in mind:

- Is this writing appropriate for the specific audience I defined in step 1 of the Publication Coach System?
- Is my topic suitable for the word count I have available, and have I succeeded in focusing on the "argument" I defined in step 1?
- Will my readers be clear about what I want them to do (the call to action)?
- Is the beginning (lede) interesting and engaging?
- Is my tone correct for the effect I hope to achieve?
- Does the structure of my piece work – that is, have I presented information in the best possible order?

As I read, I don't stop to fix the trouble spots – instead I scribble a note in the margin (or insert a comment onscreen in a different colour of type). Then, when I've finished reading the entire draft (or chapter), I stop and quickly evaluate. If the manuscript is littered with "need fix here" notes, if I'm worried I may have misserved my intended audience, or if I suspect I haven't presented information in the best possible order, I start rewriting.

Sometimes the entire structure of the piece might feel "wrong" or "off." If that is the case and I'm not sure why, I may make an outline (I believe

outlining *after* writing is acceptable) – to decide whether the structure of the piece is logical. If it's not, I may start from scratch. Or if I'm truly puzzled, I may talk to a friend about it or take a break for a day or two. Sometimes you need an outside perspective – or time away from a piece of writing.

But wait, there's more. After looking at the "forest" of your writing, you also need to go examine the individual trees. Here's where the line-by-line editing occurs.

Slow down, you move too fast

While the Publication Coach System encourages you to write quickly, it directs you to edit S-L-O-W-L-Y, line by line, trying to put yourself in your reader's spot. After you read *each sentence* (I'm not kidding – stop at the end of each sentence), ask yourself "Is this sentence likely to raise any questions in the reader's mind?" If the answer is yes, you need to make sure the next sentence answers those questions.

Writing that's effective will seem to *pull* readers along – engaging them and making them eager to read even more. As writer, you are a bit like a tour bus guide – you have a route mapped out and you explain where you're going, directing your readers' attention to the most interesting sites along the way, focusing on what's important and relevant and trying to anticipate questions they might have.

Let me make this clearer with an example. Here are three versions of an article a client of mine wrote for a website. The first version is draft 1. The second version shows the questions I asked myself while editing (in italics following each sentence). The third version is the final one (which addresses the questions and incorporates some copy edits as well).

Thanks to Siti Crook of the Energy Efficient Homes Team, www.energyefficienthomesteam.com, for permission to reprint this article in all its versions.

First version of article

I'll always remember 1986. It was the year I helplessly watched my home as it burned to the ground. It was also the year I buried Cal, my husband of 49 years.

We were teenagers when we married. I was 16 and Cal was 17. Shortly after our wedding, Cal went to fight in World War II. We had a daughter Susan, and I prayed Cal would come home from the war so we could raise our family together.

Cal came home safely from the war. We bought our first home

when Interstate 80 was coming though town and someone's farmhouse was in the way. We won the auction bid and Cal moved the entire farmhouse from town to the country. For 35 years, until the fire, I lived in the same farmhouse.

Our home is a museum of family memories and treasures. Mom collected antique plates that hang on the kitchen wall. I especially like to look at family pictures, and boxes fill tabletops and drawers.

A lifetime of memories gone in minutes. A purse, a car, and clothes are all the possessions I have left. I am alive and I feel alone and afraid.

Dennis, our second child, called to say he'd be in Iowa soon to build me a new home.

In my wildest dreams, I never imagined a home lovelier than the one Dennis built. I tend to feel warm so I like to wear short-sleeved blouses. Iowa winters are very cold. Wearing short-sleeved shirts in winter in the farmhouse was impossible!

The temperature in the new home is constant. There aren't any drafts or cold rooms. I feel comfortable in every room and I wear short-sleeved shirts even when the temperature outside is –2 degrees and blowing winds.

The fact is, the new home is so comfortable and the costs for heat and air conditioning so reasonable that I now see the fire as a blessing. If the farmhouse hadn't burnt down, I'd be a senior citizen living on a fixed budget always scrambling to find money to pay the utility companies.

At my age, 86, I am thankful that I don't worry about how I will pay to stay warm in the winter or cool in the summer. Can you say the same?

Line-by-line questioning of article

I'll always remember 1986. *Why? Strong beginning – I definitely want to read more!*

It was the year I helplessly watched my home as it burned to the ground. *What caused the fire? Now you've really grabbed my attention!*

It was also the year I buried Cal, my husband of 49 years. *Oh, that's sad. Did Cal die in the fire?*

We were teenagers when we married. *Huh? What does this have to do with the fire?*

I was 16 and Cal was 17. *Okay, but what about the fire?*

Shortly after our wedding, Cal went to fight in World War II. *Okay.*

We had a daughter Susan, and I prayed Cal would come home from the war so we could raise our family together. *That makes sense.*

Cal came home safely from the war. *Okay – that's good.*

We bought our first home when Interstate 80 was coming though town and someone's farmhouse was in the way. *Is this the same house that burned down?*

We won the auction bid and Cal moved the entire farmhouse from town to the country. *Okay.*

For 35 years, until the fire, I lived in the same farmhouse. *Okay.*

Our home is a museum of family memories and treasures. *Do you mean the home that burned down? Why are you saying "is" (instead of "was") if the home burned down?*

Mom collected antique plates that hang on the kitchen wall. *How does this relate to the story?*

I especially like to look at family pictures, and boxes fill tabletops and drawers. *Okay, but how does this relate?*

A lifetime of memories gone in minutes. *Okay, back to the fire . . . what caused it?*

A purse, a car, and clothes are all the possessions I have left. *That's horrible – but what is this story about?*

I am alive and I feel alone and afraid. *That makes sense.*

Dennis, our second child, called to say he'd be in Iowa soon to build me a new home. *Huh? This comes out of left field. Why are you suddenly telling me this?*

In my wildest dreams, I never imagined a home lovelier than the one Dennis built. *It's finished already?*

I tend to feel warm so I like to wear short-sleeved blouses. Iowa winters are very cold. *What does this have to do with your new house?*

Wearing short-sleeved shirts in winter in the farmhouse was impossible! *Oh, okay, are you saying you can wear short-sleeved shirts in the new house?*

The temperature in the new home is constant. *Okay.*

There aren't any drafts or cold rooms. *Okay.*

I feel comfortable in every room and I wear short-sleeved shirts even when the temperature outside is –2 degrees and blowing winds. *Okay.*

The fact is, the new home is so comfortable and the costs for heat and air conditioning so reasonable that I now see the fire as a

blessing. *This makes sense, but this isn't the direction I thought the story was going in.*

If the farmhouse hadn't burnt down, I'd be a senior citizen living on a fixed budget always scrambling to find money to pay the utility companies. *This makes sense.*

At my age, 86, I am thankful that I don't worry about how I will pay to stay warm in the winter or cool in the summer. *Okay.*

Can you say the same? *Okay – good ending.*

The trouble with this story is that the writer has produced an attention-grabbing beginning and then started to wander. I want to know about the fire! Also, as a reader, I'm confused about which house she's talking about. The old farmhouse? Or the new one? I don't feel as though I have a "tour guide" conducting me – I feel confused much of the time.

Revised version of article, post-questioning

I'll always remember 1986. It was the year I watched helplessly as my home burned to the ground. To this day, I don't know what caused the fire. Everything I owned was destroyed, except for my purse, a car, and the clothes on my back.

Cal, my husband, after returning home safely from World War II, had bought us that farmhouse to live in. Interstate 80 was coming though our town, Newton, Iowa, and someone's fairly new farmhouse was in the way. We won the building at an auction, so Cal moved the entire farmhouse 15 miles from town to the country. For 35 years, until the fire, I lived in this same building.

My home was a museum of family memories and treasures. My mom, before her passing, collected antique plates and hung them on the farmhouse kitchen wall. I especially liked to look at family pictures, and boxes of them filled tabletops.

In the fire, a lifetime of memories was gone in minutes. I was alive, but I felt alone and afraid. Cal also passed away the same year as the fire. What was I to do?

That was when Dennis, my second child, called to say he'd be back in Iowa soon to build me a new home. He said something about it being an energy-efficient home. I guess I didn't really know what he meant . . .

Farmhouses are what they are – cold and drafty. But they sure are better than some of the alternatives I saw when I was growing up.

Our farmhouse was a mansion compared to some of the houses other people I knew lived in.

But in my wildest dreams, I never imagined a home as lovely as the one Dennis built for me.

The temperature in my new home is constant. There aren't any drafts or cold rooms. I feel comfortable in every room, and I wear short-sleeved blouses even when the temperature outside is –2 with blowing winds. (Wearing short-sleeved blouses during winter in the farmhouse would have been a really bad idea!)

I am Dennis's mom so I guess I am somewhat biased. But I grew up during the Great Depression, so I have pretty demanding standards. If the house that Dennis built wasn't an excellent replacement for the farmhouse that burned down, I wouldn't be pleased with it.

The fact is, the new home is so comfortable and the costs for heat and air conditioning are so reasonable that I now see the fire as a blessing. If the farmhouse hadn't burned down, I'd be a senior citizen living on a fixed budget always scrambling to find money to pay the utility companies.

At my age, 86, I am thankful that I don't worry about how I will pay to stay warm in the winter or cool in the summer. Can you say the same?

Notice how the edited version gives more details about the fire right at the top, eliminating some of the reader's confusion. See how changing the verb tense in the second paragraph – from bought (simple past) to had bought (past perfect indicative) – helps better orient the reader in time. Finally, observe the words and phrases that help direct the reader through the story.

Note: If you are editing your own work, you will be able to make these sorts of changes yourself. If, however, you are editing the writing of others, you may need to talk to them to gather important missing facts or to clarify timelines, allowing you to flesh out the story more fully.

Never underestimate the value of transitions

One of the biggest challenges in substantive editing is ensuring you have enough transitions in place.

Also known as *bridges* or *connectors,* these are the words, phrases and stylistic devices that help readers move through your writing. Sometimes I even like to imagine them as cables that *pull* the reader along or as "road signs" that help direct the reader's attention.

Transitions needn't be complicated. In fact, the simplest is also one of the best. It's the word "but." I always picture the word "but" as a big red stop sign that says to the reader: "Hey, heads up. We're changing direction here." Look back at the story and see the critical role that three-letter word plays at the beginning of paragraph 7 (beginning "But in my wildest dreams . . .").

"But" is an excellent transitional word. But it is not the only one. Here is a whole list of them, organized by their particular function in a story.

Addition: moreover, furthermore, besides, in addition, also

Cause and effect: as a result, therefore, because, hence, thus, consequently, so

Comparison: likewise, similarly, as well, besides, also, too

Contrast: but, however, though, nevertheless, still, yet, on the other hand, conversely

Example: specifically, for instance, here, there, for example, to illustrate, in fact

Sequence: first, second, third, next, last, finally

Time: now, then, in the past, soon, later, after, meanwhile, following, preceding

But before we go on . . .

You likely learned in school that it is wrong to begin a sentence with the word "but." Nonsense!

As my authority, I quote *Fowler's Modern English Usage* (3rd ed.), edited by R.W. Burchfield. Says Fowler: "The widespread public belief that *But* should not be used at the beginning of a sentence seems to be unshakeable. Yet it has no foundation."

This is echoed by a more contemporary expert, Constance Hale, author of *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wickedly Effective Prose.* She writes: "A-student types who memorized everything their English teachers said insist that coordinating conjunctions [such as but, and, or] cannot begin sentences. If editors ever try to feed you such wrongheadedness, throw these gems their way: *And God said, Let there be light; and there was light.* (Courtesy, the Old Testament.) *Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.* (Courtesy, Mark Twain.) *And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden-party if they had ordered it.* (Courtesy, Katherine Mansfield.)"

The top 4 transitional devices

In addition to transitional words, you can employ transitional devices.

1. *Pique your reader's curiosity.* Make "leading" or intriguing statements that will raise a question in the reader's mind. Then answer that question in the next sentence. Here's an (imaginary) example: *If you were the kind of student who aced every exam, studying might not have seemed like a big deal. But there's a good reason why Harvard requires all students to take a time management class.* The phrase "there's a good reason . . ." is sure to get your attention because it forces you to ask yourself "What, exactly, is that good reason?" Notice how it makes you want to read the next sentence, seeking the answer.
2. *Use questions.* For example: *Foresters were required to switch to Palm Pilots for recording data in the field. The result? The company saved $3 million.* As you can see, the question raised in the second sentence makes you want to read more, to find the answer.
3. *Set up your quotes.* Whenever you are quoting someone, be sure to include some paraphrasing to "set up" the quote. This is an especially effective transition, as you can see in this story about Tiger Woods and the U.S. Open: *He finished two shots shy of safety, but Woods refused to use a nine-week layoff from competitive golf to deal with the May 3 death of his father Earl Woods as an excuse for his poor play. "It was not rust," Woods said. "Unfortunately, I just didn't put it together at the right time. I didn't execute properly."* See how the quotes don't introduce new material – they simply support the points raised in the previous sentence. But the paraphrasing helps pull the reader through the story to find out what the golfer's exact words will be.
4. *Repeat words or key ideas.* Consider the sentence I used at the top of page 64. *Transitions needn't be complicated.* That, too, was a bridge because it echoed the word "transitions" from the end of page 63. Repeating words is an effective way to bridge – especially when you're introducing a term that may not be familiar to some of your readers.

Wrapping up re-visioning

When, at last, you're satisfied that your piece meets the goals you set out during planning and you're convinced it's persuasive and relatively easy to read, you're still not finished with "editing." But you have advanced to the next stage of the editing process. Get ready for step 8.

STEP 7 ACTION SUMMARY

- As you set about revising your work, ask yourself the following questions:
  - Is this writing appropriate for the specific audience I defined in step 1 of the Publication Coach System?
  - Is my topic suitable for the word count I have available, and have I succeeded in focusing on the "argument" I defined in step 1?
  - Will my readers be clear about what I want them to do (the call to action)?
  - Is the beginning (lede) interesting and engaging?
  - Is my tone correct for the effect I hope to achieve?
  - Does the structure of my piece work – that is, have I presented information in the best possible order?
- Read your piece of writing slowly, sentence by sentence, asking yourself "Is this sentence likely to raise any questions in the reader's mind?" If it does, ensure you answer those questions in the next sentence (or rework the sentence).
- Ensure your piece of writing uses transitions to help direct your readers and pull them through the story.

STEP 8:

Copy Edit

No iron can stab the heart
with such force as a full stop
put just at the right place.

– Isaac Babel

When you've finished revising, it's time to get picky. Copy editing means fixing grammar and spelling mistakes, removing wordiness and clichés, and generally repairing your text to make it read as smoothly and easily as possible.

This effort demands patience and a deft hand, but it usually won't cause you to sweat too much. You might think of it as similar to the touching up a painter does – going over the missed spots under the windowsill or reworking the bits where the brush or roller has left unsightly marks.

Put your word processor to work

When copy editing, one of your most important jobs is to reduce wordiness. I like to turn this task into a game, so I constantly ask myself "How many words can I eliminate without changing the meaning?" I let my word processor's "find and replace" function help me with this job.

Call up the Find and Replace box. PC users should hit Control + F in Microsoft Word; Mac users should hit the Apple key + F. Then search for the following items (listed here in order of importance).

1. In the Find field, type "tion" and search through your document. Each time you find a word with that ending (for example: observation, translation, allocation), try to remove it. Because "tion" words began their lives as verbs (e.g., "observe") but are now nouns ("observation"), they force you to add another verb to make a sentence – usually a boring one like "is" or "made" ("He made an observation"). This makes your writing dull and wordy. The best way to remove the "tion" word is to turn the noun back into its original verb: *She observed the problem; he translated the document.*

2. In the Find field, type "ment," and search your document. This ending – while usually not as common as "tion"– also means that you've taken a perfectly good verb and turned it into a noun. Replace these words. For example:

   - Assignment > assign
   - Attonement > attone
   - Development > develop
   - Engagement > engage
   - Management > manage

Now let's look at how returning to the original verb helps reduce your word count and improve clarity:

Wordy: It is the job of management to inspire employees. (9 words)
Better: Managers need to inspire employees. (5 words)

3. In the Find field, type "ize" and search your document. The difficulty with "ize" words is that they are often jargon, which is hard for readers to translate. Consider, for example:

   - Maximize
   - Monetize
   - Optimize
   - Randomize

I call these "mushy" words. Read them and you won't get a picture in your mind. They seem made up – almost silly. Eliminate them. While getting rid of such words is unlikely to reduce your word count, it will boost clarity.

Mushy: Are you monetizing your website?
Better: Is your website making money?

4. In the Find field, type "which" and then "that" and search your document. Each time you spot one of these words, try to remove it. You can often do this without confusing the reader at all. For example, the sentence *These are the tasks that the millwright must accomplish* can easily be edited to *These are the tasks the millwright must accomplish.*

Continue the search for needless words

After you've gone through the article using Find and Replace, it's time to go through it again, without technical help. But you are still playing the same

game. Read each sentence slowly and carefully, making sure each word justifies itself. Does it need to be there? Would the meaning be the same if you removed it? Here are some simple examples of how you can easily shorten or tighten sentences.

Original: Join us for our annual spring sale event. (8 words)
Revised: Join us for our annual spring sale. (7 words)

Original: He was swimming across the lake. (6 words)
Revised: He swam across the lake. (5 words)

Original: I entered the field of engineering after graduating from a four-year program. (12 words)
Revised: I became an engineer after graduating from a four-year program. (10 words)

Original: My personal opinion is that *Emma* is Jane Austen's greatest novel. (11 words)
Revised: I believe *Emma* is Jane Austen's greatest novel. (8 words)

Original: The fields of Drumheller used to be packed with ancient fossils. (11 words)
Revised: The fields of Drumheller used to be packed with fossils. (10 words)

Wage war on jargon

As you edit your writing, look carefully for any words that might be understandable to you but jargon to others. While it's true that specialized terms are more precise, they also exclude readers. If a word means something only to a select group, and your readers don't belong to it, they will feel left out – maybe even stupid. This could easily be enough to make them stop reading.

For example, salespeople and marketers love to talk about the "value proposition." Near as I can tell, a value proposition is the reason someone will want to buy your product. For example, Domino Pizza's value proposition is that you get your pizza in 30 minutes or it's free. (Well, it was until 1993, when the company dropped this promise following lawsuits arising from car accidents involving drivers.) Value proposition sounds impressive. But it's babble. Ditch it. In the 1990s CEOs loved to use the term "downsizing" or "rightsizing" – anything to avoid the word "layoffs." But do you think this fooled anyone? Write in plain English.

Watch for acronyms

You should also try to avoid acronyms, those alphabet soup "words" such as SEO (search engine optimization), OSL (open source lab) and WFM (workflow management). (I'm going to stick with the word "acronym" although, technically, initials that don't spell out a word, such as FBI, are called "initialisms.") Of course, avoiding acronyms might seem silly if the acronym is easy to understand. For example, few readers would stumble over NASA, IBM or DNA.

The challenge is to assess your audience and use only those acronyms that are easily understandable to *them*. Note: This is not necessarily the same as what's easily understandable to *you*. I believe, for example, that SEO is too technical for a general readership – although it would be fine for techies. Also be aware that text littered with capital letters looks unfriendly and intimidating.

If there's no way to avoid using an acronym, provide the definition in brackets when you first use it, and then come up with a synonym to use in the rest of the text. For example, you might say WFM (workflow management) on first reference, then use the expression "the process" or "the work process" in the rest of the article.

Go cliché hunting

As you're completing your word-by-word edit, don't forget to look for clichés – which abound in most corporate and Internet writing. You know what I mean:

- compare apples to oranges
- make or break a situation
- put all our ducks in a row
- think outside the box
- walk the talk

Such images are stale and dull – deadened from overuse. Some of these expressions weren't even very clever in the first place. But others did carry meaning at one time. Take, for example, the phrase "mad as a hatter." In the nineteenth century, hat makers used mercury compounds, which did damage their brains, making them "mad." One hundred years ago, such an expression resonated. But today, it's . . . well . . . dead as a doornail.

So how do you fix this problem? After all, you can't stop clichés from spilling onto the page as you write – that's a bit like trying to stop humming a catchy tune once it's lodged itself in your consciousness. Clichés are clichés precisely because they spring to mind so readily.

But when you edit you need to find a more original image. You can often

do this by building on the cliché. Consider, for example, this sentence from a travel story on exploring Fort Myers, Florida: *As the city offers a plethora of restaurants, you can eat anything your heart desires.*

Just circle the words "anything your heart desires" and create a fresher image. It really doesn't take a whole lot of effort: *As the city offers a plethora of restaurants, you can eat anything your inner two-year-old demands.* Althought that's not a brilliant phrase, it's much more interesting than the one it replaced.

Similarly, if you've used the phrase "outside the box," ask yourself exactly what you're trying to convey. Likely you're referring to something that is unusual and innovative. So build on that thought. A box is predictable and "contains things," right? What else is that way? A textbook? A city's grid system? Your computer's hard drive?

Often, within the cliché itself, there is the germ of a much fresher and more effective image.

Accentuate the active; reduce the passive

All books on writing instruct you to use the "active voice" and avoid the "passive" – but they don't always clearly explain how to figure out the difference.

Part of the challenge is that understanding voice means talking a little bit about grammar – a subject that causes many of us to run screaming in the opposite direction. But identifying the passive is not as scary as you might think.

Here's a fast way to figure out whether a sentence is active or passive. Simply ask yourself "Who did what?" If you know who performed the verb, the sentence is usually active; if you don't, it's passive.

Some examples will make this easier to understand:

Active:
The family keeps the butter in the fridge.
Thieves stole the painting.
Workers are repairing the road.

Passive:
The butter is kept in the fridge. *Who keeps the butter in the fridge? We don't know.*
The painting was stolen. *Who stole the painting? We don't know.*
The road is being repaired. *Who repaired the road? We don't know.*

But there's one other tiny wrinkle. Sometimes sentences can be passive even when you know who is performing the verb. Here are some examples:

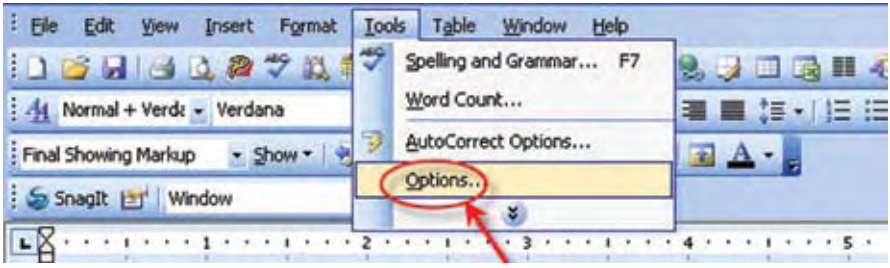
Passive:
The boy was bitten by the dog.
A report will be presented by Monica at the conference.
Tests have been conducted by researchers.

Even though you know who performed the action, these sentences are passive because the subject comes after the verb. And if that's too much grammar, here's an even simpler clue: if you've used the word "by" directly after the verb, you can be certain you've lapsed into the passive.

Putting your grammar-checker to work

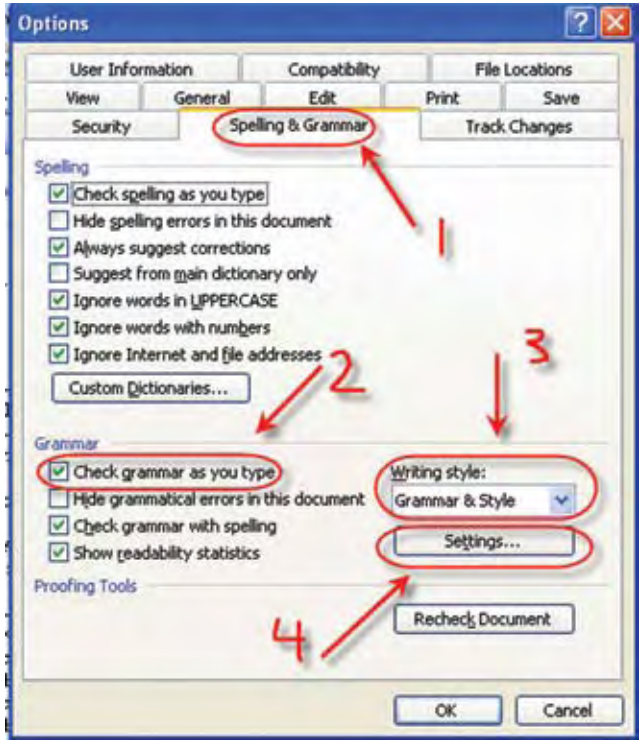
If all of this seems too much trouble, you can also instruct your computer's grammar-checker to highlight the passive for you. Here's how, using Windows XP in concert with Word 2003. (The mechanisms are similar but slightly different for earlier or later versions of Windows/Word or for Mac users. Please refer to your software's Help menu for guidance.)

STEP A: In any Word document, go to the Tools menu and select Options.

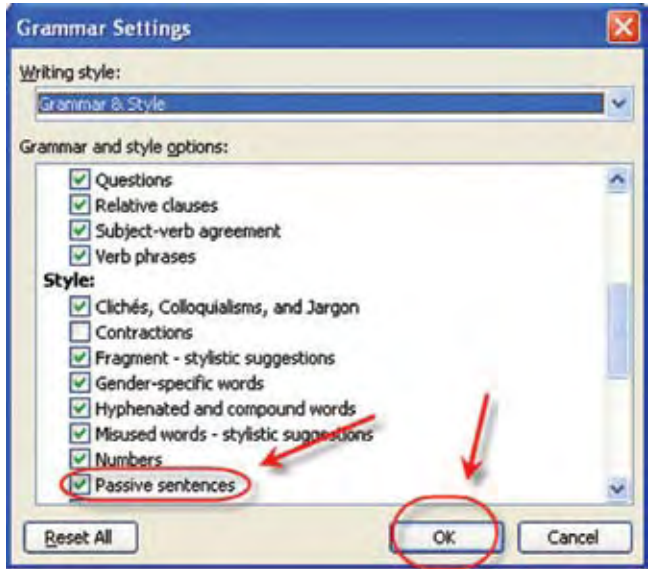


STEP B: (see illustration next page)

1. From the tabs in front of you, click on Spelling & Grammar.
2. Once you're in the Spelling & Grammar tab, tick the box that says "Check grammar as you type."
3. Then, under Writing style, ensure you've selected the "Grammar & Style" option. (If it says "Grammar only," click on the blue arrow to the left to change it to "Grammar & Style.")
4. Finally, click on Settings.



STEP C: In the Settings box, tick the "Passive sentences" box. (At this time, you can also tick other mistakes you want the grammar-checker to highlight – for example, "Clichés, Colloquialisms, and Jargon" or "Numbers.") Then click on OK.



From now on, whenever you run your spell-checker, your word processor will also check for passive sentences and highlight them for you.

Four reasons to use the active voice more often

1. Active verbs clearly reveal who is doing what. The phrase "mistakes were made" doesn't tell you who made the mistakes. Politicians and business people often like to use the passive to hide responsibility: "It was decided to raise club membership fees." Who decided? You don't know, so you can't blame them.
2. Active verbs are "friendlier" and more personal. Compare, for example:
   a. The problem was studied and a solution was found. (passive)
   b. I studied your problem and solved it for you. (active)
3. Active verbs let you write shorter sentences, and shorter sentences are easier for readers to understand. Look at this two-part example from the writing classic *Elements of Style,* by Strunk and White:
   a. There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground. (12 words)
   b. Dead leaves covered the ground. (5 words)
4. Passive sentences depend on the verb "to be," which is boring and dull. Active sentences, on the other hand, allow you to use more interesting, colourful verbs that will grab your readers' attention. In sentence a., immediately above, notice how the verb "were" (past tense of "to be") makes the sentence lifeless. In contrast, see how the verb "covered" in sentence b. gives you a clear visual image.

Why shorter is better

Finally, it's time to check your sentence length. Many writers get into trouble by writing sentences that are too long. Here I'm tempted to say that the path to hell, at least for the reader, is lined with long sentences. Instead, think short.

With short sentences, there's no mucking about. Short sentences force you to marshal your thoughts. They expose the underlying weakness of any argument. They also prevent many sticky grammatical problems. And it's not only faster for you to write short sentences, it's also faster for your audience to read them. So how short is short?

Research by the American Press Institute suggests that sentences with an average length of 14 words are the easiest for today's reader to understand.

Note the essential word "average." Some sentences should be short. The previous sentence, for example, was just six words. But some should also be longer, so your stories don't sound like refugees from a first-grade reader. (That last sentence was 20 words.) Long sentences are like salt and pepper on your meal. They are an accent, a seasoning. Without them, the food will be bland. But overuse them and you will make the meal unpalatable.

If you're faced with too many overly long sentences, it's easy just to split them into shorter sentences, like this:

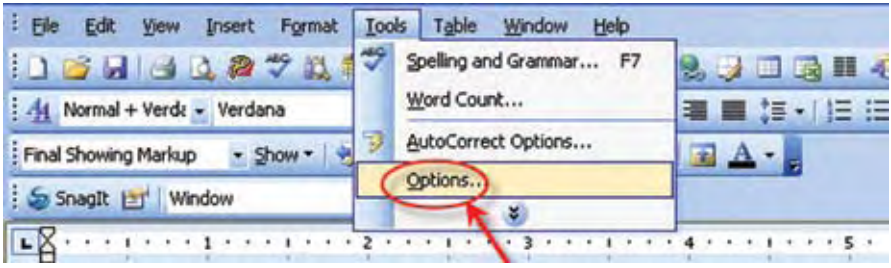
Original: Although the primary purpose of the seminar was to profile the Canadian system of corrections and conditional release, the discussion that took place during the question-and-answer period provided valuable insight and information on the corrections system in China. (1 sentence – 40 words)

Split in two: The primary purpose of the seminar was to profile the Canadian system of corrections and conditional release. During the question-and-answer period, however, we gained valuable insight and information on the corrections system in China. (2 sentences, 17 and 19 words, respectively)

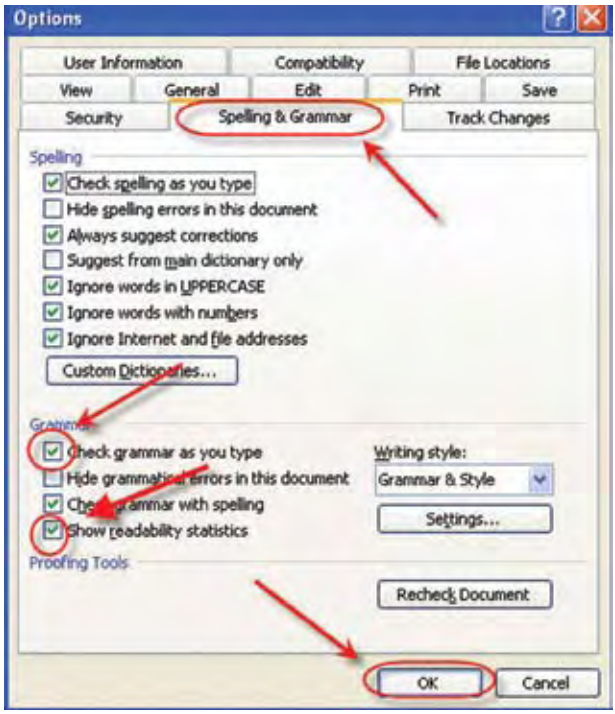
Use a hidden tool to help your editing

As you work to calculate the length of your sentences, you need not resort to counting. Hidden in Microsoft Word is a free tool that will do the work for you. Here's a quick tutorial on how to use it. (Again, this is based on Windows XP with Word 2003. If you have an earlier or later version of Windows/Word or a Mac, you may need to consult the Help menu.)

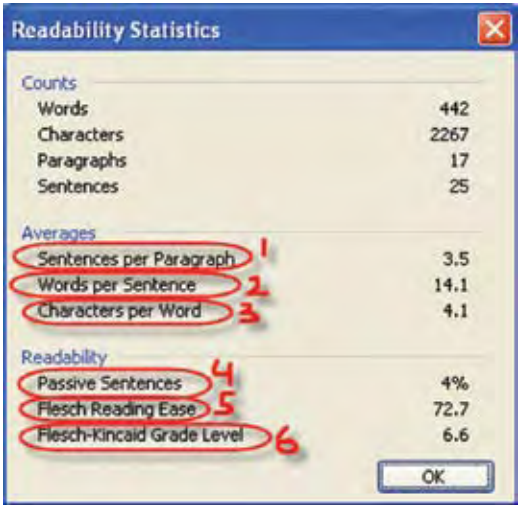
STEP 1: In any Word document, go to the Tools menu and select Options.



STEP 2: Choose the Spelling & Grammar tab and click on the box that says "Show readability statistics." Then click OK.



STEP 3: To calculate the readability of anything you've written or pasted into Word, simply run your spell-checker. (Go to the Tools menu or use the F7 key.) After your spell-checker has finished, the Readability Statistics box will pop up automatically. It looks like this. (I have added the circles and numbers to highlight important parts.)



1. *Sentences per Paragraph:* When you're writing for the general public, paragraphing is not about content, themes and "topic sentences." The main purpose of paragraphing is visual. Paragraph indents give your readers a clean white space where they can rest their eyes and find their place after looking away from the page.

   It's a good idea to keep your paragraphs to about two to three sentences, but this depends on your published column width. Narrow columns (as used on the front page of most newspapers) require very short paragraphs – usually of no more than one to two sentences. The same is true for online writing, because readers' eyes tire more easily when they read on a screen. Wider columns (as found in books and some brochures) can tolerate longer paragraphs, but it's wise not to exceed four sentences.
2. *Words per Sentence:* As mentioned earlier in this chapter, aim for an *average* of 14 words. To accomplish this, split long sentences into two or three and work hard to eliminate unnecessary words. Sometimes you can also use bullets or lists to replace sentences.
3. *Characters per Word:* Short words are easier for readers to understand. Aim for an average of five characters or less. If your characters-per-word score is higher than five, don't start counting letters – just squint at the page or screen, look for the longest words and start replacing them.
4. *Passive Sentences:* Try to reduce the passive voice – aim for no more than 10 percent, and lower is usually better. Turn passive sentences into active ones by putting the subject of the sentence first. If you have trouble identifying the passive, use Word's grammar-checker.
5. *Flesch Reading Ease:* The Flesch Reading Ease score is based on a 100-point scale. It calculates the average number of words per sentence and the average number of syllables per word. The higher the score, the easier the passage is to understand. Aim for 60 percent or better.
6. *Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level:* This score takes the Reading Ease result and translates it to the (American) grading system. You may be surprised to learn that, for this score, a lower grade is better. I recommend you aim for grade 9 or less. (To put this in context, you should know that *People* magazine is written at about a grade 7 level.)

Writers sometimes worry that a low grade level will insult readers. To this I reply: You will never insult readers by being clear. Simplistic ideas may offend, but simple writing will not. I wrote this book at about a grade 6 level.

How to improve your score

If you want to *raise* your Flesch Reading Ease score and *lower* your Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, you need to use shorter words, shorter sentences and shorter paragraphs and reduce the passive. That's it. (Fixing errors your grammar-checker highlights will not affect your score unless the errors are related to word, sentence and paragraph length or use of passive.)

The simplicity of this formula should also tell you that readability statistics are not perfect. They measure "surface" factors and miss all sorts of important subtleties, such as sentence structure and concrete versus abstract nouns. If you are writing a technical manual, for example, and must use a number of four-syllable words, your score will be higher – and may not reflect the true clarity of your writing.

So view these statistics as guidelines, not as definitive.

When can you stop editing?

How much editing is enough? That's hard to answer. But most professional writers will tell you a single substantive edit and a single copy edit are almost never enough. When I'm working on a piece, I find I usually need to go through it at least a *dozen* times, often closer to two dozen. Yes, this can be tedious work – especially for longer projects. Get through it by giving yourself ample time off. Even working on different projects can provide a welcome break.

The final step is proofreading. This is a category of its own, for which I offer the following advice:

Tips for improving your proofreading

1. Try to allow at least one day to pass after you finish writing and before you start proofing. This will give you the necessary distance to catch unconscious mistakes – such as typing *now* for *know* or *triker* for *trickier.*
2. You will catch more errors if you *print out* your text and proofread on paper. The human eye reads material onscreen much more quickly and less carefully. Print out your work before proofing it.
3. If there is some reason that prevents you from printing, use a distinctive typeface and bump up the point size before proofing. When I have to proof onscreen, I use Papyrus 20 point – this makes it easier to catch errors.
4. Question all "facts," paying particular attention to names (people, places, books, movies, songs), addresses, titles and dates. Be aware the single most common mistake is to mismatch days with dates. (Example: Tuesday, July 4, when in fact it is *Wednesday,* July 4.)

5. Be especially careful with the big, obvious yet somehow "invisible" stuff. A few months ago, I nearly signed off on a brand-new publication. The problem? We'd misspelled the *client's name* at the top of the front page! Three of us, including a professional proofreader, had managed to miss this hugely embarrassing error. Fortunately, someone else caught the mistake before it was too late. My printing rep laughed and said this happens all the time because people overlook proofreading the obvious.
6. Start at the end. Professional proofreaders often read at least once backwards. That is, they begin at the end and work back through the piece, paragraph by paragraph or even line by line. Even better, if you have time and a willing friend, share proofreading tasks. (It's easier to catch mistakes in someone else's work.)
7. Put a ruler under each line as you read the text. This stops your eye from jumping ahead to the next line.
8. Consider your text from a customer's perspective. For instance, if the piece is an invitation requiring an RSVP, it needs a phone number or e-mail address to which someone could respond. And, of course, it should have the date of the event and an address.
9. Make a list of your own common errors and check for those specifically ("its" instead of "it's" is a big problem for some people, for example).
10. Read your work aloud at least once. You'll catch a lot more errors this way.

Thanks to Pat Cope, Pam Kershaw, Melissa Arnold and Kasie Whitener, who all contributed ideas to this list.

When to call for professional help

If you're a freelance writer who is lucky enough to have an editor between you and publication, count your blessings. If not, you may want to consider hiring a professional editor or proofreader for one final check of your work.

I'm not ashamed to say that although I am an editor myself, I also need an editor. Everyone does. Before I sent this book off for design, I not only gave the manuscript to a dozen trusted readers for their responses, I also sent it to a professional. Although I don't have the time or money to do this for everything I produce, I always plan and budget for it for any long or important piece of writing, such as a book.

If you simply can't afford to hire an editor, at least try to "trade" edits with another writer. Just be aware that good editors are more often "born" than "made," so you'll be taking your chances. Still, in the absence of a professional edit, a fresh pair of eyes will almost always improve your work.

STEP 8 ACTION SUMMARY

- Use the Find and Replace function (Control + F in MS Word) to help you reduce wordiness by removing or replacing:
  - words ending in "tion"
  - words ending in "ment"
  - words ending in "ize"
  - "which" and "that"
- Read through the piece of writing again, and if removing words will not change the meaning, take them out.
- Remove jargon and put technical language in plain English.
- Remove any clichés, replacing them with fresher images.
- Aim for an average sentence length of 14 words.
- Prefer the active voice.
- Check all your writing with the Readability Statistics feature found in MS Word.
- To revise and copy edit properly, you may need to read your text a dozen times or more.
- Consider hiring a professional editor for any work that is especially important.

STEP 8½:

Read Widely

The most original writers borrowed from one another. The instruction we find in books is like fire. We fetch it from our neighbors, kindle it at home, communicate it to others, and it becomes the property of all.

– Voltaire

You're probably wondering why I've listed *reading* – and by that I mean reading the work of other authors – as a half step. It's not because it's the least worthy. On the contrary, reading is the single most important action you can take toward improving your writing.

Nor is this step here because it is last in the writing process. Anyone who wants to write needs to be a voracious reader. While you pursue step 1 of the Publication Coach System (making a plan), you can also be reading a novel. While you research and think, you can be reading magazine articles, unrelated to the topic you're writing about. As you try to find your lede, you can dip into a short story. When you write, let your work incubate or edit your writing, you can take a break by looking at a book of essays.

I've listed reading as a half step to draw attention to it – to show that although it is part of the process it is also *bigger* than the process. Returning to our painting analogy, the best painters spend a lot of time looking at walls – figuring out how the same yellow will look different in a north- or a south-facing room, how the size of the room will influence the impact of colour, and how different types of paint will produce different effects. So, too, writers need to think about words constantly. You do that by reading.

The secret is reading beyond the content

I'm not advocating just regular reading. You need to read mindfully and *passionately*. You need to read the way Jackson Pollock paints, the way Meryl Streep inhabits characters, the way Ella Fitzgerald pours herself into a song. You need to care not just about what authors are saying but about *how* they say it.

This means reading beyond the content, to see how other writers exercise their craft. If you're reading a compelling book, it's easy to get caught up in the plot, to want to know how the story ends. A good book makes you want to do that. But when you are reading to learn to write, you need to divorce yourself from the excitement and figure out the writer's method. As you read, notice the mechanics the writer is using.

You don't need to be an English lit major to deconstruct a piece of writing. You just need to apply some intelligence to the task. Start by asking yourself "What, exactly, is it that makes *me* like this piece of writing?" Once you've determined that, you need to dig deeper.

Questions to ask when reading

- *What is the basic architecture of the piece?*
  In non-fiction: Has the writer presented information in chronological order, order of importance or some other order? If the book includes stories or anecdotes, how are they incorporated?

  In fiction: How does the writing use tension and surprise to keep you interested? How are new characters introduced?
- *What sorts of words does the writer use?*
  Are the words long or short? Common or obscure? Formal or casual? How would you describe the basic vocabulary used in the piece of writing?
- *How does the writer handle description?*
  Is the description based on adjectives? Does the writer use metaphor? If so, what kinds of metaphors? (Do the metaphors have a particular theme – for example, nature, sports or food?) Which of your senses are invoked by the description – sight, sound, taste, touch, smell? Is the description given all at once, in a clump, or does the writer weave it through the entire piece or chapter? If so, how?
- *How long are the sentences the writer uses?*
  What's the typical sentence length? (Yes, count a few of them to see.) What is the typical syntax of the sentence? Does the author favour straightforward sentences – noun, verb, object – or do the sentences veer into more complex territory with a wide variety of dependent clauses? Remember that fiction writers have more latitude in sentence length and complexity. Russian novels are not a good model for your sales letter! Still, you can often pick up valuable tips by studying how the best writers have created longer sentences.
- *How does the writer handle transitions?*
  Skilful writers use transitions with surgical precision. Examine these techniques so you can replicate them. How does the writing use

repeated words to draw you from one paragraph to the next? What transitional words (but, and, therefore) has the author used to pull you along?

There are hundreds of questions you can ask yourself about a piece of writing. And while you shouldn't spoil your reading by deconstructing every single page, you will find it worthwhile to analyze a small part (say, a chapter) of a work you find compelling. Identify the single aspect of the writing you like best – maybe it's the description – and focus on that.

Don't eliminate the negative

Interestingly, it's also worthwhile to use this same literary magnifying glass to examine pieces of writing you loathe. Figuring out the negative lesson – what *not* to do – is as valuable as determining the positive one. Perhaps you become irritated when a writer slips into the passive voice. (I can think of one otherwise terrific novel that was spoiled for me by exactly this problem.) Maybe you dislike description that is too flowery. Identify the flaw and you can learn from it.

But here let me inject an important qualification. To get the benefit of reading, you need to read *widely*. All too often, I see business people who read nothing more than the newspaper and marketing books. To get the most from reading, you need to branch out.

Explore the benefits of fiction

I'm not going to force you to read the classics – Dickens, Austen, Hemingway – although they do have a lot to offer. Still, I recognize they're not to everyone's taste, and you may have been irrevocably turned off them in high school or college. But I do urge you to read at least a couple of novels a year – and not just John Grisham.

With the tiniest amount of research, you can find present-day fiction you will enjoy. Look for suggestions from friends. Talk to a librarian. Get recommendations from the best-seller lists or the book review section in your local newspaper. (And if reading novels is unmanageable for you, start with a book of short stories. You can read most short stories in half an hour or less. How hard is that?)

The reason I'm so obsessed with fiction is that no one, apart from school students, is forced to read it. As a result, fiction writers need to "sell" their skills on every page. They know all the tricks: characterization, good dialogue, pacing, metaphor, storytelling. We non-fiction writers have a lot to learn from them.

And now for something completely different

As well as fiction, I suggest you make a concerted attempt to read outside your field. If you're an engineer, read about winemaking; if you're a teacher, read about genetics; if you're a marketing consultant, read about the French Revolution. My suggestions here are purely arbitrary – the point is to go outside your field. It's too easy to limit our reading to our own industry. (I know I read far too many books about writing!)

Learning something outside of our usual purview is like taking off a pair of blinders. It lets us see new images and gain a wider vision. It gets our minds working in a different way. If you're pressed for time, read the *New Yorker* magazine. Although the articles are long by magazine standards, they are shorter than books. They're also exceptionally well written, and the magazine has a knack for making obscure subjects fascinating.

Don't ignore the self-help shelves

Finally, and this idea is going to sound zany, I suggest you read self-help books. This is not so much for the help, but for the stories. Whether you're drawn toward Dr. Phil or Dr. Spock (or drawn toward neither), inspect the shelves at your library or bookstore and pick titles that appeal to you. Self-help books are often ghost-written by professionals, so they are almost always competently written. But what I suggest you look for are the stories. These books are jam-packed with anecdotes and examples; they offer the perfect model for how to explain something theoretical by using real people.

The final step

In the exquisite and heart-breaking book *The Year of Magical Thinking,* Joan Didion describes how her late husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, spent an entire summer reading and rereading the novel *Sophie's Choice,* to try to understand author William Styron's technique. You are correct if you imagine this sort of work is never really finished – it is the job of a lifetime!

Still, reading is the final step in the Publication Coach System. You have now been introduced to the entire process for writing faster and better. But before wrapping up, we'll take a look at some of the questions that people new to the system commonly ask.

STEP 8½ ACTION SUMMARY

- Read constantly.
- Read analytically to discover the methods other writers use in their craft.
- Read fiction to learn about techniques such as tension and character development that can be useful for non-fiction.
- Read outside your field, to generate new ideas and images.
- Read self-help books to learn how to integrate stories, anecdotes and examples into your writing.

> “Don’t try to evaluate.
> Don’t try to put ideas in “order” or into categories.
> Just let the thoughts flow and capture them
> on paper. As you work on your mindmap,
> you will likely get to a point when you think,
> “Aha, *now* I know what I want to say!”
> When this happens, it’s time to write….”

Troubleshooting

A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this as a consolation in moments of despair.

– William Zinsser

While reading this book, perhaps there were spots where you wanted to argue or disagree. Or maybe there were places where you were confused or simply wanted to have a point clarified. Based on my years of coaching writers, here are the questions I'm asked most often – followed by my responses. If you have other questions not answered here, you're welcome to e-mail me, daphne@publicationcoach.com, and I'll consider adding them to future editions of this book.

I try to write quickly but I still end up staring numbly at the blank screen for what feels like hours. What am I doing wrong?

My hunch is that you've started to write before you were ready. You've shortchanged yourself in the early steps of the writing process and you still don't know what you want to say. Remember, you don't start painting a room until you have sanded and washed the walls and taped the woodwork. *Don't stare at a blank screen.* Instead, go back and review your writing plan. If it's not adequate, redo it. If your plan seems solid, then the problem is that you need to do more research.

People often make the mistake of gathering the facts and thinking their research is complete. But, as described in step 2, research is much more interesting than that. Ask yourself "Do I have enough *colour*?" (That is, do you have the stories, anecdotes and examples to bring your points to life?) Then ask yourself "Do I have enough *emotional stuff*?" (That is, material about opinions, beliefs, hopes and feelings.) If you find yourself staring at a blank screen this is almost always a sign of inadequate planning, research or thinking – steps 1, 2 and 3 of the Publication Coach System.

I've tried mindmapping and it's kind of fun, but I find it makes me write even more slowly than usual. What gives?

If mindmapping slows you down, you're probably allowing your mindmap to become an outline. This is a mistake. Mindmaps are not meant to

organize your thoughts; they are meant to inspire and invigorate. Mindmapping is essentially brainstorming with yourself. And, like any effective brainstorming exercise, its success hinges on your being open-minded and accepting whatever comes.

Don't try to evaluate. Don't try to put ideas in "order" or into categories. Just let the thoughts flow and capture them on paper. As you work on your mindmap, you will likely get to a point when you think, "Aha, *now* I know what I want to say!" When this happens, it's time to write – even if you haven't finished your mindmap. If you're worried about leaving out something important or missing a key point, tell yourself that you can go back and add it later – when you're editing.

My writing is boring and dull – even to me . . . . Sure, I can put 350 words on paper every day, but they're crummy words. No one would want to read this stuff! So what's the point?

The point is, you are creating a first draft, and you should *expect* it to be crummy. No painter expects one coat of paint to be enough to cover a room; nor should you expect your first draft to be brilliant. The great thing about writing is that you get to go back and fix it later. Think about the last time you had an argument with someone: didn't you come up with the perfect retort *after* the argument was over? Maybe you even wished you could take back some of your words – so they weren't so hurtful or so that they explained your ideas a little more clearly. With writing you have the chance to *take back* words or think of new and better ones. It's never too late until it's published.

Writing doesn't come easily to me. I have a hard time getting my ideas across; I'm just not very articulate. Even my own mother agrees.

This is exactly the sort of negative self-talk I warned you about in step 5. Sometimes it likes to disguise itself by pretending to be the voice of other people (your mother, your high school English teacher, your colleague). Adopt one of the five tactics outlined in step 5 – refuse to listen, negotiate, agree, argue, replace – and remind yourself that your job is simply to write a first draft as quickly as possible. Your editor self will get the chance to fix the grammar and spelling later. Also remember, riding a bicycle or driving a stick shift was hard at first. Writing, too, will get easier the more you do it.

I can't seem to stop myself from editing as I write. I write a sentence, I read it, and then I want to play with it – to make it better or more interesting. It just feels more natural for me to write this way.

I know, I share your pain. This is the way I used to write all the time. The problem is, it's awfully slow. That's because the creative, loosey-goosey, free-flowing part of our brain doesn't like to work at the same time as the linear, rule-bound, directive part. It's a mutually exclusive deal: when one part of the brain is driving, the other part has to take a back seat. And if you want to write quickly, you need to turn the wheel over to the creative side. But don't worry . . . the rule-bound side will get its chance drive, too. It just needs to wait for its turn.

If you have great difficulty in getting the rule-bound side to wait, I strongly suggest you try the strategies listed in step 5 – write when you wake up in the morning and turn off your screen so you can't see what you're writing.

I hate editing and can't seem to make myself do it. By the time I'm finished the rough draft, I'm exhausted. The idea of having to spend several more hours going over the same tiresome text makes me want to gag.

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who would rather edit than write (that's me) and those who would rather write than edit. If you fall into the latter category, here are some suggestions:

- Make sure your incubating time is long enough so you have some distance from the text. (See step 6.)
- Do your editing a little bit at a time. Painters don't try to paint every room in a house all at once – they work gradually, one room at a time. Try editing in 15-minute chunks. We all can tolerate even the most loathsome task for 15 minutes.
- Start off with the computer-based editing tasks described in step 8. You don't have to "think" much for any of them; your computer will do most of the work.
- Make rough notes on a printout of your text (it's easier on the eyes and you'll catch more mistakes), but do any rewriting directly on the computer (it's faster and less painful that way).
- Give your piece of writing to trusted friends for comment. If they find certain spots confusing or unclear, make fixing those spots your main editing work.
- If all else fails, hire a professional to help.

My grammar is terrible – I can't spell to save my life. Teachers always complained about it and I know they were right.

I can relate to this problem. I'm not much of a speller myself and I have a son who is dyslexic – the rules of spelling and grammar elude him. But don't let these mechanics of writing stop you from expressing yourself. Remember as well, there are two types of editing – substantive and copy. Being terrible at spelling or grammar should not stop you from substantive editing. But if you have a learning disability that makes it impossible for you to copy edit, get professional help.

Do I really need to follow the steps in the order you describe? Isn't every writer different – don't we all need to find our own way?

Every writer *is* different. We all have our own quirks and idiosyncrasies. But just as a tennis teacher will encourage you to hold your racquet in a certain way, and to adopt a specific stance on the court as you wait to return the serve, I encourage you to follow the writing system until you become more confident.

If you find yourself resisting the system, you might consider making a deal with yourself. Persuade yourself that all you need to do is give it a fair try – and then if it doesn't work you can abandon it.

If you *still* find yourself resisting, it may be a sign that you have other, bigger blocks in your writing. Perhaps the problem is that your subject matter bores you. (And if this relates to your business, that's a threatening idea.) Perhaps you fear failure? Or success? If these "big" issues are troubling you, you need to address them. Ironically, I suggest doing this through writing. Instead of working on your articles, start with a blank piece of paper or a clear screen and begin by writing "I hate this writing project because . . . ." Then finish the sentence. If you do this honestly and openly, you are likely to uncover the real reason you don't want to write.

Finally, if you are a person who simply hates following rules, remember that as you build experience you will learn when you can bend the rules or even break them. I'm reasonably certain that Andre Agassi and Martina Navratilova don't worry too much about their racquet grip any more. They've developed their own. And, like them, you, too, can take this writing system and put your own spin on it.

10 Tips for Writing a Book

I am of the firm belief that everybody could write books and I never understand why they don't. After all, everybody speaks. Once the grammar has been learnt it is simply talking on paper and in time learning what not to say.

– Beryl Bainbridge

Once you become comfortable with writing shorter pieces, eventually the question will arise: "Could I write a book?" Yes, you can.

And you can use the Publication Coach System to do it. Here are ten suggestions to get you started:

1. **Write an outline.** True, I warned against outlines for writing projects of less than 5,000 words. But books – which can run upwards of 100,000 words – are simply too big and too complex to "hold in your head." The most useful outline you can produce will be a skeleton of the book, consisting of chapter headings or titles. Remember, don't start outlining *within* each chapter. Instead, treat the chapter as an article, and draw up a mindmap for it. (If the chapter is longer than 5,000 words, divide the chapter into chunks and attack them one at a time.) Mindmapping is superior to outlining because it helps you tap into the creative part of your brain and will allow you to continue to make discoveries as you write, which will make writing more fun for you.
2. **Develop a system for organizing your research.** The issue is volume. With a short article you can often put all of your research in a single Word document. With a book, however, that method quickly becomes unwieldy. Some people like index cards because they're easy to move around and refile. Others prefer electronic filing systems. You can set up one for each chapter and then use Google desktop to search for information based on keywords. Decide what suits you – but have the system worked out before you do a lick of research. Figuring out systems midway through a writing project is a good way to drive yourself crazy.
3. **Follow the Publication Coach System** (make a plan, research, think and rethink, find your lede, write, incubate, revise, copy edit and read widely). But follow these steps *one chapter at a time,* rather than the whole book at once. That way you won't be stuck in, say,

the research phase. Remember, it's dangerous to let too much time elapse without writing.

4. **Decide upon a word target and a timeline.** (This is the single most important step.) Calculate how long your book is going to be and how long you want to take to write it. Then give yourself a daily word quota for writing. For example, if your book is going to be 40,000 words and you want to finish it in six months, then you need to write 308 words a day (I'm allowing for weekends off). If you can't figure out how long your book should be, go to the library and look at books that "feel" like the right length for you. Choose one and then estimate its word count. (Count words on a sample page, then multiply by the total number of pages in the book.)

   It's essential to have a goal. If you're going to paint a room, you need to know the number of square feet of wall space, so you can determine the right amount of paint. If you're going to write a book, you need to know how many words you want in the finished project. Just be sure to keep your daily quota at a reasonable level. Anyone should be able to write 300 words a day, but it probably takes a professional writer or someone with an unusual commitment to produce more than 1,000 words per day.

5. **Write every weekday.** Writing is a practice and a habit. If you don't do it often it starts to acquire a mysterious air and becomes frightening and difficult. Think of it like exercise. It's better to do a little bit frequently than to do a lot irregularly. That said, let me give you official permission to take weekends off. Everyone needs a break, too.

6. **Try to do your writing in the morning.** Some writers will tell you that it's important to get up at 5:00 a.m. and write then. Sure, there are advantages to early-morning writing. (Children aren't awake and the phone isn't ringing yet, so you can work undisturbed.) But some people need their morning sleep. Just write soon after waking up – whatever time that might be.

   It's useful to write when you're a tiny bit sleepy – because your editor self is usually slower to wake than your creative self. Writing in the morning can help you outwit your internal editor. The other big advantage is that we're all more likely to achieve our commitments when we work on them early in the day. (Studies show that people who exercise in the morning tend to stick with their programs longer than afternoon or evening exercisers.) I don't let myself do anything else until I have my word quota finished.

   If you have another job that sends you out the door early in the

morning, you need to set your alarm half an hour early (this may mean 5:00 a.m.) or carve out another time for your writing. If you take public transit, perhaps you can write in the bus or train on the way to work. Maybe you can write during a morning coffee break? Look at your schedule and be creative. "Wishing" doesn't make writing happen; you have to plan for it.

7. **Be sure to chart your progress.** The great benefit of keeping a chart is that you can see the slow but steady accumulation of your words. You will also notice patterns occurring over time. For instance, you may see that you have three stellar days in a row, where the words flow and you dramatically exceed your word quota. Then you see a flurry of difficult days, where the words just don't want to come out and you feel blocked and frustrated. If you can force yourself to work through these blocks, keeping your commitment to write 300 words (or whatever you've chosen as your quota), you will build a record of success. You will know that no matter what happens, no matter how you feel, you can still hit your quota. This is extremely empowering. Here is a sample of the record I keep, based on a table I created in Word.

Date	# of words written today	Time	How I felt/ comments	Total words done	Words remaining
Jan. 8	460	35 min	Slow to start but accelerated as I went along	11,669	8,331
Jan. 9	393	20 min	Went really well today	12,062	7,938
Jan. 10	1165	40 min	Well – but not all of it "real" writing. Incorporated some previously written material.	13,227	6,773

8. **Be sure to keep your writing and editing steps separate.** This is much harder when writing a book than when writing an article, especially because as you start each new day, you're tempted to edit the previous day's work. Here's what I did to prevent that problem while writing this book. At the end of each writing session, I took 10

minutes or so to plot out a writing task for the *next day.* Sometimes I created a mindmap; at other times, I just scribbled down notes. I then put all of this material in a file folder or a Word document that I could read the next morning.

By doing this, I didn't have to look at the whole book or even the whole chapter before starting to write and thus I wasn't tempted to slip into editing. If I decided it was important to have the last bit of text from the chapter in front of me, I'd copy it over to a fresh Word document. Then at the end of my daily writing session, I would copy all of that day's work into the master file. Sounds like a lot of effort, I know, but it took only a couple of minutes.

9. **Edit as you go (tip 8 notwithstanding).** When writing this book, I was so concerned about keeping the writing and editing tasks separate that I didn't do any editing until I'd finished the entire book. This was a mistake because it left me feeling completely overwhelmed. For my next book, I plan to write in the mornings and carve out an hour for editing each afternoon. To allow for enough incubating time, I will edit material only when it is several weeks old.
10. **Be flexible and open to change.** This advice comes from a friend who writes young adult fiction. She once heard of a novelist who finished her book, then on the way to the mailbox with the manuscript, decided to rewrite the whole novel from a first-person perspective – thereby changing the story entirely. When you write a book, it's hard to avoid getting overly attached to the first version. But hold lightly instead of tightly. Or, as my friend says, "See revising as an opportunity and not a root canal."

Author Interviews

The feeling that the work is magnificent, and the feeling that it is abominable, are both mosquitoes to be repelled, ignored, or killed, but not indulged.

– Annie Dillard

I love reading about writing. Whenever I'm burned out or exhausted and the "I-can't-write-any-more-it's-just-too-hard" gremlins grab me by the throat, I find it comforting to learn about how others approach the craft. Such reading invariably provides solid evidence that writing is not brain surgery – it's simply another job that needs to be done.

For this chapter, I interviewed four established writers about their work and writing methods. I selected each for a reason – Michael Katz for his ability to tell stories; John Forde for his conversational style, despite writing about a "dry" subject; Anne Miller for her skill with metaphor; and Anne Giardini for her ability to squeeze writing into her fantastically busy life.

MICHAEL KATZ
GETTING READERS' ATTENTION

Michael Katz collects stories the way some kids hoard baseball cards. He's collected an enormous file of them on his hard drive – anecdotes, thoughts, jokes, metaphors – lovingly transcribed for future use. So when Michael sits down to create his biweekly newsletter, he doesn't so much *write* as mine for gold.

"I never give a presentation or a business talk without starting with a story," Michael says. "It's much more authentic and less stiff. People also wonder where the hell you're going. It keeps them engaged."

When is he going to fall?

And Michael knows how to keep people engaged. His newsletter about newsletters, which goes out under his company name Blue Penguin Development, has a loyal contingent of readers, who are addicted to his jokes

and stories. Part of the appeal is his high-wire act – that is, watching how on earth he's going to extract a pithy business "lesson" from the anecdote on which each newsletter is based. But, somehow, he always does it.

Here, for example, is a column on a pair of pants that didn't fit.

Michael Jordan's got nothing on you

I made a mistake last week involving pants . . . I bought them. The problem is, and I have to say that I pretty much knew this before I left the store, they don't fit.

In my defense, I am a man. I don't like clothes shopping to begin with, and when you throw in the extra step of having to try things on, I get to a point where I'd gladly plunk down my credit card on an ill-fitting clown suit, if I thought it would get me out of the store faster.

But the real mistake was taking the pants home, cutting off the tags and *then* deciding they don't really fit. Now I'm stuck with them, and despite having spent the better part of this week trying to convince myself that they're okay, I know I am a liar.

In my experience (and in this case, I don't think it applies to just men) most of us settle on a profession in about the same way. We wander around, try a few things on, and, if we find something we can squeeze into, we take it.

Unfortunately, and based on emails, phone calls and cups of coffee with lots of working people, there are way too many of us just tolerating work, instead of thriving in it. We have, in effect, cut the tags off before finding a good fit.

Which brings me to Michael Jordan. Here's a guy who, in his 13 years as a professional basketball player, won just about every award imaginable in that sport; he's arguably the best ever to walk the face of the Earth. So much so that if you were to describe the attributes of the ideal basketball player, you'd more or less describe Jordan, up to and including his winning personality, which made him ideal for product endorsements.

But here's the key question: Was he really that extraordinary as a human being, or was he just lucky? Lucky, in the sense that the things that came naturally to him – height, speed, strength, intelligence, endurance, competitiveness, and a love of basketball – just happened to be a perfect fit for an existing profession?

I believe it's more the latter. Sure, he worked hard, but no more than you or I do. The fact is, if being unusually tall were a *negative*

in basketball instead of the positive that it is, Jordan might have just turned out to be one more good-looking bald guy named Michael.

This next thing I'm about to say may sound like an exaggeration, but I don't think it is.

I think we're *all* Michael Jordans (or Bruce Springsteens or Donald Trumps, or anyone who's had extraordinary success in a given field). The problem is that for most people, the unique package of skills, abilities and interests within each of us doesn't fit perfectly and obviously into an *existing* profession. So we pick from among the available options and settle for good enough.

Or maybe we don't. My view – after spending the first 20 years of my professional life in conventional jobs, being slightly successful doing things I slightly liked – is that the point of starting your own business is to create a *custom-made* occupation. A unique livelihood that pulls together all the things you love and are good at doing, into one basketball-dunking, crowd-pleasing, "Can I have your autograph please?" concoction. It sure beats working.

And so as you sit here thinking about 2007 – particularly if you're not energized by what you're doing every day – maybe it's time to take a new approach.

In the coming year, why don't we all spend a little less time straining to fit our idiosyncratic selves into an existing pair of pants, and a little more time thinking about a new wardrobe entirely . . . one that's based on whatever natural talents and interests are uniquely our own.

I'll see you at the All-Star game.

(Reprinted with permission of Blue Penguin Development.)

Can you make a decent living with writing?

Michael (Katz, not Jordan) is a business school grad who migrated into marketing. In college he liked to write parodies, and once he started working he began publishing an alumni type of newsletter for the people he'd gone to school with.

In 1992, he wrote a humour book, *Congratulations, Your Girlfriend's Engaged*, but as he describes it, "I never saw the 'writing' track crossing over with the 'making a living' track." However, in the year 2000 he became brave enough to go into business on his own. He intended to focus on helping companies develop their websites but he quickly moved into publishing newsletters.

Michael explains: "When I began publishing this newsletter, people I'd never heard of started asking to be added to the list. I realized I could shift

over to this thing I like to do." And that's when he understood that his love for stories and jokes could become a secret weapon.

"My newsletter always related to some dumb story, but I saw right away that people really liked it. It made the message so much 'stickier' for people."

It's important to sound like yourself

Michael believes that his newsletter works not just because of the stories and jokes but also because his writing is a natural extension of his personality. "My writing sounds like me talking," he says. "Too many people think writing has to be stiff and formal and perfect English, so they use silly words like 'youths.' Well, who says 'youths'? Why not just use the word 'kids'?"

But for all his informality, he's still firmly committed to the benefits of self-editing. "When I edit, I can make a joke a little better or clarify something a little bit," he says. "I'm also aware of trying to make sentences shorter, using more frequent paragraph breaks and sprinkling boldface all over the place.

"By the time I hit the publish button, I've read that thing 15 times in a nearly finished state. I don't mind editing because I never tire of reading my own stuff – this is where vanity is helpful."

To subscribe to Michael's twice-monthly E-Newsletter on E-Newsletters, *go to his website: www.bluepenguindevelopment.com. (Signup is on the left-hand side in the middle of the brownish "swoosh".)*

JOHN FORDE
THE ART OF FINDING THE STORY

When John (also known as Jack) Forde was in college, he had a fiction teacher who asked everyone in the class to write a page-and-a-half description of a father who had lost his son in the war. But here was the kicker: They weren't allowed to describe the son. Or the father. Or the war. Or anything outside of a barn on the father's property.

"It was kind of a tedious exercise, but it taught me a lot," says John. "Later on, you just start using those techniques without even knowing it."

The French connection

Today John is a wildly successful copywriter living at least half the year in Paris who is also known for his charming and thoughtful copywriting

newsletter – *The Copywriter's Roundtable* – sent out every Tuesday to subscribers around the world.

A would-be novelist who more or less fell into copywriting after completing a graduate degree in philosophy and English literature, John is the kind of guy who bends stereotypes. He's a marketing expert who speaks without hype or urgency. He's an ad writer who prefers to read the classics. He is successful in his field but moved to Paris in part for his wife's career as a French baroque opera singer.

John enjoys thinking about writing and – like many professionals whose income depends on how much they produce – has some interesting opinions on speed. "I consider myself a faster writer than I used to be," he says. "You get faster once you get past the insecurity of putting stuff on paper," he adds. "You might lose or change 75 to 80 percent of those words. You just need to learn not to get so married to a phrase once you put it down."

Planning is key to effective writing

John is also a big believer in planning and organization – and can see the clear benefits in producing his own newsletter. "What seems to determine how fast I can write it is the clarity of the idea," he says. "Some days I have a very clear idea and I can get it done in an hour. When I don't have a clear idea, it will take me three to four hours."

At the heart of this organizational struggle is coming up with a way to manage the research and to transform ideas into writing that is both coherent and logical. "Some of it is just the gut instinct that you develop from doing a lot of writing," John says. "You start to have a sense of how big an idea is and how unwieldy it is, and you learn how to bring it down to the simple core. A lot of it is figuring out which ideas to exclude – there's so much there. You need to break your writing down into small ideas you can work with."

Basically, John says, writing well comes down to a passion for the story, a curiosity about other people and an enduring interest in the world. "Writers can get interested in just about anything," he says. "That's what makes them writers. If they can't, they should probably go do something else."

Spotting the little flash of gold in the pan

As a person who writes largely about a topic that some might find dull – the financial services industry – John is an expert at finding the nugget of interest, the story that can make an article or sales letter shine. For instance, recently John wrote a 24-page promotional piece for an energy

and commodities letter, when oil prices were skyrocketing. "I must have read five dozen articles and four or five books on the oil market, oil geopolitics, the geology of oil, the history of oil," he says. "Did you know it was a laxative before it was a fuel?" He ended up building the whole promo around a geologist's report from the 1950s. And in one section, he was able to relate the entire history of oil, from decaying dinosaurs to the war in the Middle East, in about half a page. "The promo did extremely well," he says.

The trick to being breezy

The secret, John says, is the material has to be engrossing to the average reader. "It's just not interesting when you get some blowhard CEO who wants to show off as many four-syllable words as he can. You need to use breezy, easy-to-understand language, and the best way to do that is to find a way to care about the subject you're writing about."

When that happens, it's sheer magic. The best feeling, says John, is getting absorbed in the writing itself. "I love sitting down to write something in the morning and suddenly discovering it's four in the afternoon."

To subscribe to John's weekly newsletter The Copywriter's Roundtable, *send an e-mail to signup@jackforde.com.*

ANNE MILLER
THE BEAUTY OF METAPHOR

When it comes to job titles, Anne Miller is a bit like a monk at a stockbrokers' convention. She stands out.

Anne doesn't describe herself as a teacher, a salesperson, a trainer or a consultant – although, in fact, she has done all of these jobs. Instead, she calls herself a *metaphorian.*

According to the dictionary, a metaphor is a direct comparison between two or more seemingly unrelated subjects. For example: the world's a stage (Shakespeare), you're the Tower of Pisa (Cole Porter), the trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat (Lily Tomlin).

But I like how Anne puts it in her wonderful little book *Metaphorically Selling:* "A metaphor is a shortcut to instant understanding."

Language arts meets business smarts

Anne started her working life as an English teacher, so perhaps it's natural that when she gravitated toward sales – taking a job on Wall Street – she'd find a way to focus on the literary side of the industry. She settled on her

specialty one day during a training session when she was preaching about the power of metaphors. Intrigued, one of the participants asked her, "Is there a book on this?" Anne's rapid-fire response was: "Not yet!" Now she helps people (mainly in the financial services industry) sell, present and write better by using more metaphors.

Getting on the metaphor fast track

Why do metaphors work so well? Says Anne: "People who use metaphors and analogies are able to communicate more effectively. They can make their point in an instant." This tactic shouldn't be lost on anyone who wants to write interesting, persuasive copy.

Anne likes to tell the story of how Lee Iacocca engineered some $1.2 billion in loan guarantees for Chrysler by using the metaphor "safety net" instead of the much more negative "bailout." She also describes how the top salesperson for Steinway & Sons, who helps clients find exactly the right piano, uses the term "piano matchmaker" to describe her services. And she delights in failed presidential candidate Ross Perot's colourful self-description: "My role is that of a grain of sand to the oyster. We've got to irritate Washington a little bit."

You, too, can create metaphors

Anne believes anyone can come up with memorable metaphors. "Some people are gifted with extraordinarily imaginative minds – they're called poets," she says. "But I'm less concerned with *original* than with *reasonable*. Everyone's had a first day at school; everyone's eaten bad airline food. Anyone can pull images from these areas. You can even look to the news. If you say: 'You don't want to be another Enron,' or 'He's the Donald Trump of the department,' everyone will know immediately what you mean."

That said, Anne has five warnings for would-be metaphorians. Here is her cautionary list.

1. **Make sure the metaphor is suitable for your audience.** Don't talk about football if your audience is mostly women; don't get into a complicated sailing metaphor in front of a bunch of landlubbers. And remember that sex, religion and politics are almost never appropriate topics. Anne recalls being in the audience when a presenter tried to get people's attention by comparing performance in the stock market to performance in bed. "It bombed," she says. Even geography can be a sensitive topic. You know the old line "It's like Buffalo – I spent a week there one day"? In upstate New York, that line is likely to go over like, well, a lead balloon.

2. **Keep it simple.** The best metaphor is the one that leads to instant understanding. If your audience needs a PhD in physics to get the analogy, then you're doomed (unless, of course, your audience is a bunch of physicists). But if you write, "She's the neighbourhood's Martha Stewart," everyone will know exactly what you mean.
3. **Don't use too many metaphors or mix them up.** You'll not only risk a mention in the *New Yorker*'s funny Block That Metaphor column, you'll also confuse your audience. Thus, be sure to avoid crazy images like "A leopard can't change his stripes" (attributed to Al Gore) and "Brilliant sunshine rained down on Fort Collins" (Rush Limbaugh).
4. **Relate your metaphor to the point you're trying to make.** This might sound obvious, but it's easy to miss. You have to draw the connection for your audience. Here's an example from Anne's book.

   Incomplete: This continuous downsizing is corporate anorexia.
   Complete: This continuous downsizing is corporate anorexia. You can get thin but it's no way to get healthy. (from *Fortune* magazine).

5. **Avoid clichés.** Sure, we all say hot as hell, cold as ice, and it's a train wreck waiting to happen. But if you work on the clichés just a little more, you can usually come up with a fresher image. Counsels Anne: "Don't always reach for sports analogies – look to the world of science, nature, education, transportation, food. Ask yourself 'What is this like?' Usually you can come up with something else." Anne also recommends sitting down with a group of colleagues or friends to brainstorm. In that way, every person's different life experiences can help produce fresh ideas.

It's work coming up with metaphors for your writing, but it's one of the best writing tricks you can use to make your readers happier and more engaged. As Anne says: "People don't retain things, but they retain images. You hold their attention, you make your point, and you can move them to action much more easily."

To subscribe to Anne's monthly newsletter The Metaphor Minute, *go to: www.annemiller.com/Metaphor_minute_signup.asp. If you're in sales, you might also be interested in her quarterly newsletter* Seamless Selling.

ANNE GIARDINI
ANY TIME IS TIME TO WRITE

You might want to call Anne Giardini a compulsive overachiever. She is a lawyer with a busy and demanding job as the head of the legal department at a major corporation. She has three children, ages 17, 15 and 11. And she's no slacker mom, either – she manages her son's hockey team and takes on challenges like organizing Christmas hampers for needy families.

Oh, and in her "spare" time she has written a charming and critically acclaimed novel, *The Sad Truth About Happiness,* and is already more than halfway through her second, *Nicolo Piccolo.*

Keeping writing in perspective

On paper, Anne is the sort of person you'd be inclined to write off as an annoying do-it-all. But in real life, she is one of the kindest, warmest, most thoughtful people you could hope to meet. She's even non-neurotic about writing. "I try not to think of my novel as work," she says. "Instead, I see it as a source of happiness."

Anne – who is a friend of mine – is a beacon to the idea that there is always time to write. She is famous for dragging her laptop to hockey practices or games and tapping away while her son skates. "In that context, getting 12 good sentences is pretty good," she says.

I believe it is Anne's practical, no-nonsense approach to writing that makes her so productive.

The writer as quilter

"I do everything in snippets," Anne says. "I think of myself as a quilter. I'm constantly interrupted by phone, e-mail – I never feel I can give anything my undivided attention. But I've learned to drop and pick up again. Any time is good for writing."

Convinced of the importance of "thinking time" (step 3 of the Publication Coach System), she says: "I feel I have part of my brain that's always rumbling along on my book. It's like keeping the tap running in the back so the pipes don't freeze. I believe in letting my subconscious work on things. I don't think I could wait for the muse. Or else I'd need a very quick muse . . . "

For a time, before she started her novel, Anne was a weekly columnist for a national newspaper. She believes this experience taught her the value of regular writing – "There's nothing like the tyranny of a deadline," she

says – and that experience made her believe it was possible to produce a novel.

What fiction and non-fiction have in common

Reflecting on the difference between fiction and non-fiction, Anne argues that both forms reinforce each other. Non-fiction is more structured and disciplined; fiction has what she calls a more "baggy" structure. But both can use the same tools – character development, conflict and resolution.

Anne says she tries to separate writing and editing, doing the former as quickly as possible and the latter as slowly as she needs. "I write quite quickly and I don't fuss about it," she says. "Then I go back and edit and I do fuss." But she also finds that doing a little editing is a way of "priming the pump" and preparing herself for the next writing task.

She uses the metaphor of painting a picture to describe her approach. Her initial burst of writing is like an artist creating a preliminary sketch. Then she moves in to add more detail – considering the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch – making the sketch richer and more colourful.

Evaluating your productivity

Anne tries not to have any preconceived thoughts about her output on any given day. "Sometimes I've written a whole chapter and feel I should have done more; at other times a paragraph feels just right."

But for those times when the writing is especially laboured, she has a trick. "I use the word count feature quite a lot to reward myself," she says.

Anne's book The Sad Truth About Happiness *is published by Fourth Estate, 2005, ISBN-10: 0060741767.*

CONCLUSION

Peaceful Writing

I can't believe it! Reading and writing actually paid off!

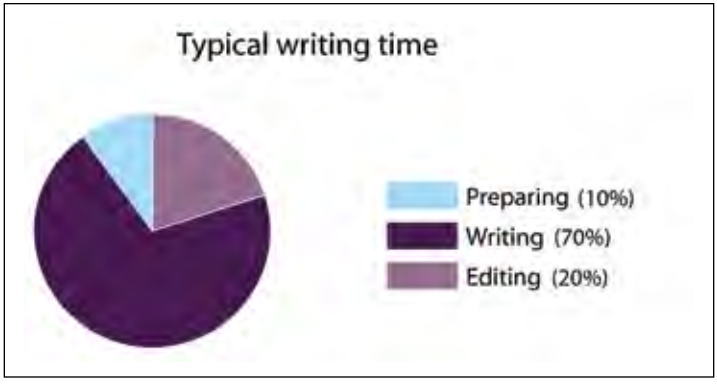
– Matt Groening

When I lead writing workshops, I often begin by asking participants to tell me what percentage of time they devote to various aspects of writing. To keep it simple – and before introducing the 8½ steps – I ask them to consider their writing in three stages:

- Preparing
- Writing
- Editing

A writer's time

"So," I ask, "how much time do you spend on each area?" With few exceptions, people confess they divide their time something like this:



Of course, there's the occasional professional procrastinator who will spend 60 percent of the time doing research – "There's just one more Web link I need to check." And every once in a while there's a person who writes easily and effortlessly – and, often as not, refuses to edit altogether.

But for the most part, I find people (a) don't *think* nearly enough before they start to write and (b) tend to mix up writing with editing into one

gigantic, time-consuming hairball of a process. They also tend to view their post-writing "editing" as a simple job of correcting spelling mistakes and fixing punctuation. It's little wonder that, as the Gene Fowler joke goes, writing for these people means staring at the screen until beads of blood form on their forehead.

Despite the enormous pain of the beads-of-blood approach, workshop participants are usually flabbergasted when I propose the following division of labour instead:

Looks like a peace sign, doesn't it? Perhaps you could think of this dramatic change as a way of making peace with your writing.

Making better use of your time (and brain)

The big advantage to writing this way is that you won't be fighting nature. That might sound melodramatic, but let me explain. Trying to think, write and edit at the same time is not something our brains were meant to do. This is simply a writing method many of us developed over the years, because no one taught us to approach it differently.

After all, "thinking" doesn't look like a legitimate part of writing (especially if you're walking on the beach or washing the dishes as you do it). And editing looks *too much* like writing. If others were watching you at your computer, they'd be hard-pressed to know whether you were writing or editing – to the outsider both tasks look the same. Only *you* know the difference.

But once you know the difference, you can approach your writing in a systematic way – which means following distinct steps, in a particular order. Writing will still be work, but it will be *easier.*

The Publication Coach System revisited

Here, then, is a recap of the 8½ steps.

Step 1: Make a plan. Don't start writing until you've defined your reader and your wordcount. Also be very clear about your "call to action" (what you want your reader to do).

Step 2: Do your research. You need to do enough research so that you're able to talk knowledgeably and comfortably about your topic with a friend or colleague. But don't forget: as well as facts and figures, you also want anecdotes, examples and metaphors. This "emotional" content will make your writing more interesting to you – and, of course, to your reader. The best way to collect this information is by talking to other people (including clients or customers) about their feelings and stories.

Step 3: Think and rethink. Now you've completed your research, it's time to re-evaluate your plan. Does your central argument still make sense? (If not, revise it.) Do you know what you want to say? If not, please don't write an outline; instead, do a mindmap. If you are not writing down your thoughts, be sure to have another way to capture them – whether by a digital recorder or by using your cellphone to leave yourself messages on your own voicemail.

Step 4: Find your lede. Don't stare at the blank screen until beads of blood form on your forehead. Instead, refer to the "Rolodex of ledes" in step 4 and try to plug your information into an existing lede. Err on the side of beginning with an anecdote or example.

Step 5: Write. Okay, now you're allowed to write. Do it quickly, without evaluating what flows from your brain. (The time for editing is later.) Watch your self-talk to ensure you're not bad-mouthing yourself – "This is too hard; I'm a crummy writer." If you find yourself making such unhelpful comments, replace them with positive ones: "I can do this; I'm an excellent writer."

Step 6: Let it incubate. Take a break. Go do something else for at least a day. If you like, it's acceptable to edit an earlier piece or to write something new. You don't necessarily need the break from writing; you just need the break from this particular piece.

Step 7: Revise. Prepare to spend a good chunk of time on this step. First, "step back" and decide whether the piece of writing, as a whole, achieves what you want it to. Then, read it slowly, line by line, making sure each sentence builds on the previous one.

Step 8: Copy edit. This is the picky work. Refer to the action summary at the end of step 8 for a helpful checklist of the various editing chores that you can undertake to make your writing sparkle.

Step 8½: Read widely. Good writers are good readers. As you read the words of others, you'll unconsciously start to absorb their style. Just as teenagers talk and dress like their peers, you will start to sound like the writers you read. That's why you should read constantly – and carefully. As the systems analysts like to say: "Garbage in, garbage out."

Finally, let's return one last time to the analogy that launched this book. Just as dipping a brush into paint and slapping it on the walls is only a small part of what makes up "painting," so, too, getting words out of your brain and onto the page is only a small part of what we call "writing."

But if you recognize it as a step-by-step process – and take it one step at a time – then you too will write faster, better.

Resources

Words are like money; there is nothing so useless, unless when in actual use.

– Samuel Butler

PRINT

Writing inspiration

Buzan, Tony, and Buzan, Barry. *The Mindmap Book*. London: BBC, 2000. This book will tell you everything you need to know about mindmapping from Tony Buzan – the man who invented the term. It's not dedicated to writing but explores how you can use the technique for a wide variety of tasks, including note-taking, planning and studying. Buzan has written more than fifty books on the topic.

Cameron, Julia. *The Right to Write*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998. Easy to read and inspirational. I like this book much better than Cameron's more famous *The Artist's Way*.

Crystal, David and Hilary. *Words on Words*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Thousands of interesting and amusing quotes about writing.

Fiore, Neil. *The Now Habit*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1989. Fiore is a psychologist who specializes in preventing procrastination. Some terrific ideas in here for blocked writers.

Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones*. Boston: Shambhala, 1986. More than twenty years ago, Golberg made me want to write. Her book still offers valuable lessons.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Funny and delightful, this book is jam-packed with writing wisdom.

Prose, Francine. *Reading Like a Writer*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. Learn as the aptly named Prose deconstructs the tools and tricks of the greats.

Rico, Gabriele Lusser. *Writing the Natural Way.* Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1983. This classic describes how "clustering" (a.k.a. mindmapping) can be used to unblock writing. Recently re-released in a 25th-anniversary edition.

Saltzman, Joel. *If You Can Talk You Can Write.* New York: Warner Books, 1993. Funny and shrewd, this is a pep talk of a book that will convince you anyone can write.

Grammar, style and usage

Burchfield, R.W., ed. *Fowler's Modern English Usage.* 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Purists condemn this edition, saying it isn't nearly as good as its predecessors. I think they should take the starch out of their shirts. This edition is tops and much easier to use.

Davis, Kenneth W. *The McGraw-Hill 36-Hour Course in Business Writing and Communication*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005. Ken makes many of the same arguments that I do about writing – particularly about the need to plan. His book is terrific and so is his blog. Check out the latter at www.manageyourwriting.com.

Gordon, Karen. *The Transitive Vampire: An Adult Guide to Grammar.* London: Severn House Publishers, 1985. The funniest grammar book you'll ever read. Probably the shortest, too. Terrific illustrations.

Gordon, Karen. *The Well-Tempered Sentence: A Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed.* New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1983. A companion to *The Transitive Vampire.*

Hale, Constance. *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wickedly Effective Prose*. New York: Broadway Books, 1999. I love Hale's style and her sensible advice. Sometimes I read it just for fun, but a thorough index makes this a useful reference book, too.

Miller, Anne. *Metaphorically Selling.* New York: Chiron Associates, 2004. Metaphors make writing sing. Read this book to learn why and how.

Plotnick, Arthur. *Spunk and Bite*. New York: Random House, 2005. Plotnick is cheeky, as his title suggests. But he knows his stuff. This is my current all-round favourite style book.

Strunk, William Jr., and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style.* New York: Macmillan, 1979. The classic.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction.* New York: HarperPerennial, 1990. I first encountered Zinsser in university and his advice ages well.

ELECTRONIC

Have you ever described a 360-degree turn as an "about face"? Save yourself from future embarrassment by exploring this alphabetical and amazingly long list of common errors in English. A professor of English at Washington State University produced the site. *www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html*

Calling all word bores. This handy paste-and-see website ranks the words you've used most frequently in any text. Be sure to try it if you have a tendency to overuse "pet words." *www.wordcounter.com*

Get those ducks out of their row! If the only phrase that springs to your mind is the nearest cliché, you need help from the cliché finder. This free tool lets you paste in any piece of your writing and then watch while the software searches through it for clichés the way a mama monkey combs her little ones' fur for nits. *http://cliche.theinfo.org*

Needing some new word power? The Web is filled with "word of the day" sites that will help you build your vocabulary. But this unusual one explores new words and phrases – terms like "dark tourism," "ethical eaters," and "green urbanism." If you want to add a certain frisson of hipness to your writing, check it out. *www.wordspy.com*

At a loss for words? The Visual Thesaurus allows you to type a word or phrase into its search box. Then, voilà, a starburst will explode on your screen, displaying all the synonyms. There's a demonstration offered on the site but if you want to use it regularly, you need to buy the software (US $39.95) or get a subscription (US $19.95/year). I write a monthly column for VT, but I'm not an affiliate and get no royalty or commission if you decide to buy or subscribe. *www.visualthesaurus.com*

Take a red pencil to your website. The Publication Coach System explained how to use readability statistics to improve your writing. Now you can use the same principles on your entire website. This free grading tool makes it easy. *www.websitegrader.com*

It's as plain as the nose on your face. Writing in Plain English just makes sense. Here's a website by the U.K. woman who helped launch the Plain English movement in 1979 by shredding hundreds of badly written official documents in Parliament Square. Fight on, Chrissie! *www.plainenglish.co.uk*

Would you call a spade a "rectangular-shaped metal digging device"? If so, you need to fight the bull. This cheeky website, in aid of a book titled *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots,* also offers some nifty free software you can download to help remove the jargon from your writing. *www.fightthebull.com*

Acknowledgments

Hold fast to the words of your ancestors.

– Maori proverb

Thanks to all my writing mentors over the years, and especially to the dedicated and insightful band of volunteer readers who reviewed an earlier draft of this book: Siti Crook, Stephanie Diamond, Philip Eckman, Sharon Gravelle, Bob Janes, Katie Jay, Eve Johnson, Karen Kelm, Janet Leishman, Mackay Rippey and David Thacker. And I'd like to offer a special tip of the hat to Maureen Bayless, Luuk Christaens, Catherine Kirkness, Xan McCallum and Noel Rodrigue for their especially detailed notes. Thanks also to my very fine copy editor, Naomi Pauls, and talented designer, Warren Clark. Any mistakes that remain are mine.

Finally, I'd like to thank my family – my patient husband, Eric, and my somewhat less patient but nevertheless charming and spirited children, Claire, Alison and Duncan (who helped desktop this book). Mom won't have to disappear into her writing loft so often now.

> “Good writers are good readers.
> As you read the words of others,
> you’ll unconsciously start to absorb their style.
> Just as teenagers talk and dress like their peers,
> you will start to sound like the writers you read.
> That’s why you should read constantly –
> and carefully.”

About the Author

If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.

– Elmore Leonard

Daphne Gray-Grant grew up in the newspaper business. Her family owned a weekly newspaper in Vancouver, B.C., and she worked there from the age of 16, writing stories, editing, dealing with newspaper carriers and even selling the odd advertisement. During this time she also managed to earn an honours degree in political science from the University of British Columbia.

After leaving the family business she became books editor at the daily *Vancouver Sun* and then moved up to the role of features editor, a job she held for six years, running a large department and being responsible for many daily pages.

From there she was recruited to the corporate side, becoming the first-ever director of communications for the paper's parent company and developing considerable expertise in crisis communications.

On the birth of her triplet children, Daphne briefly left paid employment but returned a year later, in 1995, to launch her own business as a communications consultant.

In addition to helping companies write and produce newsletters, brochures and websites and manage both internal and external communications, she also coaches corporate writers and copywriters in how to write faster and better.

Daphne's popular newsletter, *Power Writing*, goes out every Tuesday to subscribers around the world. If you'd like to sign up (it's free), go to www.publicationcoach.com.

> “Just as dipping a brush into paint
> and slapping it on the walls is only
> a small part of what makes up “painting,”
> so, too, getting words out of your brain
> and onto the page is only a small part
> of what we call “writing.” But if you recognize it
> as a step-by-step process – and take it
> one step at a time – then you too
> will write faster, better.”

Index

The first thing . . . is to buy quite a lot of paper, a bottle of ink, and a pen. After that you merely have to write.

– Aldous Huxley

"Consider what it would feel like to enjoy *writing, instead of dreading it. Picture feeling self-assured and in control at the keyboard, instead of feeling stressed and frustrated."*

So many people hate writing – but the problem is, they've never been taught how to do it properly! *8½ Steps to Writing Faster, Better* removes the mystery from the process – and gives you a blueprint for writing success. Using the metaphor of painting a room, former journalist turned writing coach Daphne Gray-Grant describes the separate and distinct steps of writing, and why they must be done in a particular order – just as you wouldn't paint a room before you finished sanding.

8½ Steps to Writing Faster, Better *lives up to Daphne's own high standards for clear, concise writing and "un-daunts" the process for the rest of us. I recommend this book to anyone interested in honing their craft. Beginners or people who are intimidated by the writing process will certainly benefit, however, the book also offers veteran writers new perspectives.*

Karen Kelm, Thyme Signatures

How many of us are old friends to that sinking feeling when confronted with a blank sheet of paper? In this short book, professional writer Daphne Gray-Grant sets out her well-proven writing system, looking not only at fear of the blank sheet but also at over-researching, understructuring and losing your audience. If you want to or have to write, you are guaranteed to learn valuable new ways to approach writing.

Bob Janes, A Helping Hand

Ross den Otter photo

Daphne Gray-Grant lives in Vancouver, Canada, where she works as a communications consultant and writing coach via her website, **www.publicationcoach.com**.