

How to Write Effective Text

Summary

- What people really want
- Decide what you want to accomplish
- Figure out what your reader wants to accomplish
- Examine your features and benefits
- Organize your thoughts using an outline
- Fill in the blanks
- Write as you talk

Happiness. Love. Comfort. And sex. When you boil life down to its essence, these are the four things that every person (and animal) on this planet wants.

That's why it *doesn't* matter how great a layout your letter or Email has, or how dazzling your presentation looks if you don't have good, clear structure and is written in such way that it *appeals to your readers' basic desires*—and is *easy to read*.

If your letter isn't well written, then you won't reach your goal. Letters are about saying something that's important to you (and, you hope, to your reader). If you have nothing to say, what's the point of writing at all?

But the *way* you say something can be as important as what you say. The tone and style of your writing can say as much about you as the topics you cover. At [immediate effects](#) we aim to be friendly and conversational, to write the way we'd talk, so when you read it, it's more like a friend telling you something than a technician trying to explain incomprehensible data.

How-to?

So how do you accomplish this magic when you only have 26 letters to work with? *Where do you start?* You shouldn't start with the blank page you fear, but with the information you already know—*the reason you're writing*: What do you want to accomplish? Sell? Inform? Inspire? Call to action? Once you clearly state the *reason* you're writing, the process itself helps you along.

A note about computers and writing: I believe strongly in writing on a computer. While computers can't write for you (and those of us who write for a living hope they never can!), they are great tools for organizing your thoughts, speeding your writing, and easing editing. Don't believe people who say you can't write on a computer. The computer is just a tool—it can't block your creativity, in fact, it just eliminates a lot of the tedium that can get in your way.

Step 1: What do you want to accomplish?

The first step is to write down a list of what you want to accomplish with the piece you're writing. Be specific. Be general. Think of as many things as you can—brainstorm. They can be lists or random ideas. Don't bother putting them in any order. Don't bother with spelling or punctuation or grammar. Just put down ideas—as many as you can.

Don't stop yourself from putting down an idea because you think it might "sound stupid," or you're afraid someone else will make fun of it. No one needs to see this list except you. People often throw away good ideas because they think they're too obvious or too silly or that someone else may have thought of them. *Don't edit yourself* yet or you may lose some good ideas.

Once you have as many ideas as you can think of (and remember, you can always add things later as they come into your head), it's time to make another list.

Step 2: What does the reader want to accomplish?

The reader wants to know "what's in it for *me*", **not** "what's in it for *you*." You've got a product or service to sell, but readers will only buy it if it does something for them. Saving them time and money are the "standard" things that most products or services offer—so you need to be more specific than that.

Start with the ways the "basic needs" manifest themselves—usually, how will your product or service make a person happier. "My house looks old and dull—I wish someone would come in and make it look *beautiful* for me." Or, "My last vacation was a nightmare, I want someone to plan *the perfect vacation* for me," or, "I want to show my mate how much I love him/her, what should I do?" or "I hate my job, can't someone help me find one I'd *enjoy*?"

You might even think of your readers as characters in a play. Imagine their lives and see where you or your product could fit in to make them better—something you can do with yet another list.

Step 3: Examine your features and benefits

There's a reason why "features and benefits" lists work--because it's not enough to know about a feature. Readers need to know why each feature is important *to them*. This may be obvious to you—but it also may be something the reader has never considered. Here's an example.

- **Feature:** "Our designs are tested for readability." (If you wrote this, then you should know why this is important, but your reader may not, so you explain.)

- **Benefit:** This means our designs don't just look good—they actually *work* for you and get your point across. To see an example of the features & benefits for Productivity Training, [click here](#).

Other examples: "Our staff has traveled the globe—that means they know, *firsthand*, which hotels are good and which aren't—ensuring you always get the best." Or, "Our flowers are flown in fresh, daily—this gives you a world of choice and means nothing is ever out of season." Or, "We don't design to win awards for ourselves, we design to win business for you."

Step 4: Organizing your thoughts (using an outline)

OK, now you have three lists—what you want to get out of the project, what *the reader* wants to get out of the project, and the features and benefits of your product or service. Now what?

Now it's time to *organize*. One of the most common writing mistakes people make concerns scattered and unfocused information. Organizing your information can solve both of those problems at once—it will help you find the focus that gives your writing a structure.

Most of today's word processing programs have an *outlining* feature. Fortunately, this feature is nothing at all like the dry outlining you had to do in school. This is an easy and fun feature that makes organizing your writing as easy as dragging the mouse (and using your brain, we hope).

To make your text into headings you can drag around, highlight all your text, and choose the Heading 1 name from your toolbar. Go into Outlining mode (usually under the View menu). You'll see little minuses next to each item. The minus means this item has no text "under" it (like a paragraph under a heading). Once you start arranging items and creating a hierarchy ("Here's is the main topic and that idea there should go under here...") plus signs will appear next to topics that *do* have other items under them.

The "Inverted Pyramid"

Journalists are taught to put the most important elements of the story at the beginning. There are two reasons for this—one is that readers may not read the whole story, so you want them to get the most important information first—just in case they stop reading.

The other practical reason is that stories often need to be cut to fit into a given space, and they're cut from the bottom where the least important items are. There's plenty of room on the Web, so unlike printed matter, you probably won't have to cut what you write. But even so, it's a good idea to put the most important information first. Some Web pundits claim that shorter is better when it comes to writing for the Web. We at eFuse.com don't necessarily agree with that; we feel more content, depth, and detail is better. But if you do agree with "short is better," then putting your most important information first makes it easier to cut your text.

- **By Importance:** You're going to do the same thing—put the most important items first—then work down to the details. You can do this visually by dragging the items up or down the list (grab them by the minus or plus sign).
- **By Topic:** Once you have them in order of importance, it's time to start thinking sideways. No, that doesn't mean you're allowed to be crabby at this point. It means that you're going to organize by topic; you're going to find the main point of a topic and take the other elements and put them *under* it. You do this by dragging them up or down the list to the right topic, then dragging them to the right so they're "under" the heading above.

When you're finished, you should have a few Heading 1's (your major topics), and each one of them should have several Heading 2's (sub topics), and each of those may have several Heading 3's. Don't feel compelled to fill out all six levels; three is usually enough.

Step 5: Filling in the blanks

What you might not have realized all this time is that you were creating the structure of your document—the skeleton. Now that you have your headings, you just need to fill in the blanks—write about each topic under its heading.

Once again, don't edit yourself. Just write. Don't dwell on any one point too long; if you can't figure out what to say, then just move on. You can add to it or change it later. Write as much or as little as you want. The more you write, the more you have to work with—but longer isn't necessarily better. You want to get your points across and when you've accomplished that, stop writing. As you fill in the blanks, you might feel the need to change or rearrange your outline—go right ahead.

Step 6: Editing yourself

Now that you've written, it's finally time to rewrite. This is the part that most people hate, because they think what they've written is perfect. It usually isn't—even professionals spend a lot of time rewriting.

Before you start editing, you should save your file under a new name so you don't lose your first draft as you edit. You might want to refer to something in the first draft and if you don't save a copy, it will be lost.

It's a good idea to give a copy of what you've written to someone whose writing you admire. They can read it on paper—or they can read it electronically and use your word processor's "revisions" and "annotations" features to make notes, just as they'd do on paper.

When someone gives you their notes (get them in writing), look at them the day you get them. Then put them away and *don't* make any changes because you may not agree with most of their notes as you're still in love with what you wrote. Look at the notes again the next day (or the day after that) and by that time, they may start to have some validity.

Here's my personal rule about notes from others: If one person tells you something and you disagree, you can ignore it. If two people tell you the same thing, you should seriously consider what they say. If three people tell you the same thing, you'd better either make the change or be *passionately* sure of your own genius.

Of course, this is predicated on giving your writing to the *right* people—it's easy to find three people who don't know what they're talking about, in which case, even if they agree, it still doesn't count!

There are a couple of things that make rewriting easier. The first is to read your copy out loud into a tape recorder.

Writing as you speak

Many people are under the mistaken impression that they have to write differently than they talk. While this is true in a *few* technical or academic situations, "perfectly correct" writing often comes across as *stilted* (which means it's harder to read, which means fewer people read it, which means it defeats its own purpose, so what's the point?).

If you want your writing to be easy to read, you'll want to write *conversationally*, so the writing "sounds" in the reader's head as if you're speaking to them (i.e. "active" writing). If your writing sounds stiff, simply rephrase it in your head and say it out loud. Then write it down. If you want, use a tape recorder, then type what you said, just as you said it. Just this one simple step will instantly make a world of improvement in your writing.

An added bonus of reading your text aloud is that you'll also find errors, sentences that make no sense, ideas that aren't clear, or thoughts that ramble on.

Cut it out

Whenever possible, *cut out anything that's not essential*. You want your piece to make its point as succinctly as possible.

- Shorter sentences are better than long ones.
- Simple, common words are better than long, unusual ones. You don't want people to have to pick up a dictionary just to understand you. "Eschew obfuscation" means the same thing as "avoid confusion." Guess which one is more effective—the one most people understand. Big words won't impress people, they'll just obfuscate them.

Finally, go back into Outline View and make sure your structure still makes sense. If it doesn't, drag your subheads up or down the list, and the text below them will move automatically.

Writing doesn't have to be hard

Some people are afraid of writing, maybe because they had bad experiences in school (or because their mothers were frightened by newspapers while they were still in the womb). Whatever the reason, *get over it*.

There's no need to be scared if you know what you want to say. Just *say* it, and then write it down. It really can be that easy.

Finally, find someone you trust to read what you've written and give you *kind, constructive* feedback. Don't let someone you know to be unkind or "out to get you" read your stuff, they'll just hurt your feelings and make you never want to write again. If they do make negative comments on your writing, try to ignore them.

You *can* do it. Really, you can. *Why don't you try to write something, right now?*