Practical Writing

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CONTENTS

WHY CAN'T PEOPLE WRITE?

Writing is easy. Anyone who speaks English can write a simple report. Writing is just putting words on paper instead of speaking them. This small book can teach you how to write reports that communicate your thoughts and ideas clearly to other people.   The end product will not be great literature but simple, effective communication. All you have to do is learn an easy step-by-step method, think occasionally and practice.

If it's so easy, why can't people write? Most people have not been taught how to write. Instead of being shown the steps in the process of writing, schools and universities often try to teach writing by examples from the classics of English literature. This is a mistake. To teach basic writing with examples of literary classics is like teaching arithmetic with examples of Albert Einstein's work. Authors are professional writers whose aim is to produce writing that can be understood or interpreted in several different ways. The goal of non-literary writers is to communicate one idea at a time, simply and clearly.

Some people are afraid to write because they think they must use difficult words and complicated sentences. There is nothing wrong with using everyday language and simple sentences in a report. (This book uses the word 'report' to mean any essay, composition, or business report.) The names change but the methods of good writing remain the same.) However, it is important to be more careful with language when writing so that the meaning is plain. A reader can't ask the writer questions! A good report is written in standard English, not slang, and uses correct grammar and accurate spelling.

There are three stages to the process of writing: planning, writing, and mechanics. The mechanics of writing are grammar, spelling, punctuation, and the layout of the page for the final copy. Good writing starts with a single sentence and a plan. The plan is then expanded into an outline.

From the outline, paragraphs are built of basic sentences, sentences that any speaker of English can produce.   These short sentences are re-written until they are clear and correct. Then they are combined into longer sentences that sound better. Up to this point the mechanics of language have been ignored. Worrying about correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation can interfere with planning and thinking but now these elements become important. The writing must be carefully checked for errors and corrected. Finally the report is recopied so that it is neat and readable. Then the report is finished.

Writing is a skill that can be learned. When we learn any new skill like cooking, carpentry, or tennis, at first we are unsure of ourselves and clumsy. This lack of confidence is natural but as we become familiar with the job, it gets easier. A person learning to write goes through the same process. Your first efforts at writing will not be perfect. Writing has to be practiced. The simple process and a few rules are not difficult or mysterious but they must be remembered, applied, and practiced. Even while we are learning, one benefit of writing is that we are forced to concentrate on our ideas.   Writing is thinking.   A well written report is clear thinking put in an easy to read form.

THE 3 STAGES OF WRITING
1. Planning
2. Writing
3. Mechanics

THE FIRST SENTENCE AND A PLAN

In a report, the First Sentence tells the reader exactly what the report is about. The First Sentence must be carefully worded because it is the starting point of the writing. It must be clear and concise. This sentence is the foundation of the report and if it is not well written the rest of the report will be weak.

You must give the First Sentence a lot of thought. The job of the first line of your report is to get the readers' attention and let them know what the report is about.. To make a single sentence really good, you must think before you write. First, know what you are going to write about. Make sure you have all your research or arguments written down. You may scribble ideas on slips of paper and sort them out or you may sit back, relax, and let the ideas come to you. Either way, you must think! When you are satisfied that you have enough good ideas, go to work and write a single sentence that contains the overall idea of the report. Write at least three versions of the First Sentence and use the best one of the three. The First Sentence should say neither more nor less than you want it to say.

One danger for inexperienced writers is choosing topics that are too general, too big to be covered in a short report. You must set limits to the topic. Do not promise the readers more than you can deliver or they will lose interest and stop reading. Here are some examples of the First Sentence.

Pollution is destroying the world.   (not good)
Noise pollution is bad for people.   (a little better)
Research shows how noise pollution affects our health.   (good)

Setting definite limits to the topic may make the First Sentence longer but it will tell the reader what to expect. A good First Sentence will also set good guidelines for you, the writer, and will make the report easier to write.

From the First Sentence of the report, you will make a Plan for the report. A basic Plan should have at least five parts. The first part is your First Sentence. The next three are sub-topics of the First Sentence. These sub-topics may be simple descriptions, a stating of facts, or attempts to persuade the reader that your thoughts make sense. The order of the Plan is important: it must be logical and easy for the reader to follow. A reader who has to sort out a jumble of facts will not understand the main concept of the report. The sequence of ideas should be obvious to the reader. The last part of the plan is a conclusion bringing the report to an end.

Now you can see how the report is put together. Writing is not difficult. Start with a carefully worded First Sentence that defines the content of the report. Next create a Plan by finding at least three ideas that explain or expand the meaning of the First Sentence. Stop with a conclusion.   Each of the parts of the Plan will become one paragraph in the finished report. The First Sentence becomes the Introduction which is followed by three paragraphs of information. The last paragraph is the conclusion. That's all there is to it. The next step will be to expand the Plan into an Outline.

THE PLAN
START with the First Sentence
1.
2. Ideas that support the topic
3.
STOP with a conclusion

THE OUTLINE

The outline of a report is made by expanding the plan. Each of the ideas in the plan is expanded in the outline and will become a paragraph in the report. Faced with the problem of sorting old things, most people will sort them into piles. Metal goes in one pile, wood in another, and clothing in a third. This is a plan. Then clothing can be sub-divided into piles of sweaters, shirts, and socks. In a report it is ideas that must be divided and sub-divided. An outline is a way of sorting out ideas. The change from plan to outline is natural and easy. It's just common sense.

A paragraph is just one stage in the development of the topic but it has its own structure. A paragraph could be called a mini-report and the outline is a series of mini-plans. An outline is just an extension of the plan. Start by writing down the idea from the plan. This is the topic of the paragraph. Next find three items that support the idea.   Depending on the material, these items will be details of description or an explanation of the idea.   It is a very good idea to give an example to show the readers what you mean. Whatever you chose to put in the paragraph, it should convince the readers that the idea is valid. Then they will be ready to go on to the next paragraph and another stage of the topic.

In order to direct the readers' attention, there should be a definite sequence to the steps in a paragraph. The first sentence, the topic of the paragraph, is the idea you most want the readers to remember. The second sentence usually restates the idea to make it clear or narrows it down to make it more specific. In a short paragraph one sentence is enough to do this. The rest of the paragraph, the three sub-items, explain or contrast or give more details. A new paragraph is another step in the development of the report. It indicates that a new idea has begun.

As the outline is built, you must pay attention to the logic of the report. Each step must lead the readers on and help them understand your ideas. If you find an error in your logic, or discover a better way to explain the topic, re-write the outline or even change the plan. It is easier to make changes now. Cutting out large parts of your work later will be difficult and painful.

The finished outline should include all of the important information that will be included in the report. The outline is the last stage of thinking about the content and planning. The steps that follow have to do with actual writing.

An example of the planning process is on the next page.

It is the plan for the report on *Graphics* on page 27.

Notice the difference between the outline and the finished work.

No plan is perfect the first time. It probably will be changed.

Photocopy the blank planning sheet and outline form and use

them to help you get started.

After a little practice, you won't need them.

EXAMPLE PLAN
(for the chapter of this book entitled "Graphics")

Title Graphics

Outline

First Sentence Graphics can help a reader in many ways.

1. Computers make a change, especially in graphics..

2. Graphics are drawings, photos, tables and charts..

3. 3 kinds of graphics: information, decoration & text

Paragraph I Information graphics support the ideas in a report

1. Keep graphic and idea together

2. Number the graphics and refer to the number.

3. Don't use just to impress the reader.

Paragraph II Decorative images from logo to fine art

1. Used in advertising and publications

2. Businesses did not use decoration but now they do.

3. Not used for academic papers

Paragraph III Text can be used for graphic effect

1. Chapter and section titles
2. Size and font of letters
3. Italics.
4. Bullets

Conclusion   The design of the text, combined with the graphics and images, makes a report look good. Do them carefully.

PHOTOCOPY THIS PAGE

Title

Topic Sentence (Choose 1 of 3.)

Final choice for Topic Sentence.

Plan
Use the Topic Sentence as the first sentence of the Introduction paragraph..

Introduction.

Sub-topics of the plan.
(Each of these will become a paragraph in the report.)

1.

2.

3.

Conclusion

OUTLINE   PHOTOCOPY THIS PAGE

Introduction
(Use the topic sentence of the report as the first sentence of the Introduction.)

First sentence

1.

2.

3.

Paragraph 1 Main Point

1.

2.

3.

Paragraph 2 Main Point

1.

2.

3.

Paragraph 3 Main Point

1.

2.

3.

Conclusion.

KINDS OF PARAGRAPHS

After the outline has been completed but before going on to write a rough draft of the report, you need to think about the uses of the paragraphs. Paragraphs are like tools. Each paragraph has a special purpose and each has its own shape. They are as different as hammers and screwdrivers. The basic building block is the standard paragraph (see *The Outline*, page 5). But there are two paragraphs in a report that are different: the first paragraph which introduces the topic and the last one which ends the report.

> Note: The First Sentence of the plan sometimes becomes the last sentence of the introduction. So to avoid confusion from here on it will be referred to as the Topic Sentence.

There are two types of introductions. One way is to start a report with the topic sentence. Then use the rest of the paragraph to explain how the material will be examined. Say that new cars will be compared for quality, price, and safety. This type of introduction is appropriate for short reports of one or two pages, especially scientific and technical writing, and for some textbooks. This opening is a good choice only if the readers are likely to be familiar with the material. Readers may not have all the facts needed to understand your report. Do not assume that they do. For an example of the 'topic first' introduction, see *The Outline* on page 5.

Another way to write an introduction, one that is less likely to confuse the reader, is to put the topic sentence last. This method establishes a background for the material by taking the reader from a broad concept down to the specific topic. This kind of paragraph has the shape of a funnel. Start by saying whether the report is about religion, pineapples, or carburetors. The next few sentences can narrow the field down to Buddhism, canned pineapples, or broken carburetors. The last sentence is the topic sentence of the report. In your outline move the topic sentence from the top of the section and put it last. Then write the plan of the introduction.

The first paragraph on this page is an example of a 'topic last' introduction. A conclusion can be used for a number of purposes. It can give an overview of the report or suggest future action or study. It can draw a conclusion or express personal opinion. Remember that personal opinions belong in the conclusion and not in the body of the report. The final paragraph does not have to make any judgments. It just

has to close the report. The conclusion should also connect the topic to a larger concept or direct the reader back to the world at large. Without some sense of connection the report will seem isolated and unimportant. The conclusion is like a standard paragraph but it needs a concluding statement at the end. The final sentence brings the report to a full stop.

As you can see, each paragraph has a function. The first paragraph prepares the reader for the topic and the last paragraph brings the report to a halt.   In planning a report, and while writing, make sure each paragraph does the job it should. Keeping order in paragraphs will help build a solid report, one with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

PLANNING PROBLEMS

Introduction Sometimes it is difficult to plan the introduction when doing the outline. If you are not able to decide which sort of introduction is best, save it until you have done the outline.
Conclusion Ending a report can be difficult too. A good idea for a conclusion may not come until you have written the rough draft. Do it then.

THE ROUGH DRAFT

A rough draft is made by changing the outline into paragraphs of complete sentences. Each section of the outline is a paragraph. Work on one paragraph at a time. Change each item of the outline from a phrase to a complete sentence. Then add details, a few sentences to explain the idea. Use simple, basic sentences. They can be edited later. The rough draft is the place to add graphics and quotations collected during your research. The planning is finished now and the actual writing begins. The outline lists the bare facts of the report. The rough draft ties the facts together and explains them.

As a writer, your job is to help the readers understand the material in the report. Take as much time and space as you need but be specific. Use concrete details. Give facts to back up your statements and use examples whenever possible. It is not enough to say that flying is safer than driving. You must convince the readers with facts. Tell them how many accidents there are per mile traveled on airplanes and how many on the roads. Give the numbers. Pictures, graphs, or tables are often the best examples. Now is the time to decide where to put the graphics and quotations in the report. If no hard facts are available or if you are trying to explain a concept, quote the opinion of an expert in the field or make a comparison. You could say, for example, that a computer is like a typewriter and then explain the differences. Whether you use logic, graphics, or comparisons, make sure each item is clearly explained.

Without doubt you will have to rewrite the rough draft at least once and probably several times. When you think of a better way to express a thought, find that the logic is not as clear as it seemed or a sentence does not sound right, rewrite the sentence. A sentence may have to be moved, perhaps it even belongs in another paragraph. A good reason to write short sentences in the rough draft is that they are easier to move around. Occasionally it may even be necessary to change the sequence of the paragraphs. This is the process of rewriting. As you replace or alter sentences you will scratch out words, write notes in the margin, and draw arrows pointing here and there. When the page gets confusing and unreadable, it is time to rewrite the whole report.

The best, most orderly way to rewrite is to re-copy and to do it before you get thoroughly confused. "Cut and paste" is an efficient way to do it. Snip out the good pieces with scissors and rearrange them. When they are in order, glue them onto a new page and continue rewriting. Today most word processors have a "cut and paste" feature that does the job electronically. Computers have made the job neater

but be sure to save the old copy. You may need it later. Many writers prefer the old fashioned way, handwriting. It is a bit slower, but recopying in longhand gives you more time to think and, where necessary, to make changes.

Rewrite or recopy as often as necessary but be careful not to stray too far from your plan. You may get lost and have to start again. Don't worry at this point about writing perfect sentences or about spelling and punctuation. Just maintain the flow of ideas and information. Each time you rewrite, try to improve the report. Good writing comes from rewriting.

ROUGH DRAFT
Include graphics, pictures, tables and quotations now.

WORKING DRAFT - SENTENCES

In the working draft, combine the simple sentences of the rough draft to make better, more natural sentences. From some books and articles you could get the idea that the language used for writing has to be different from ordinary speech. Not true! Some writing is boring or difficult to understand because of clumsy sentences and an artificial vocabulary. Reports do not have to be hard to read. If you can speak English you can write a clear report and it can be done using ordinary vocabulary and good English sentences.

Short, basic sentences are useful in the rough draft but no one talks that way. The short sentences must be combined to sound more natural. Here are some sample sentences.

> **Cars pollute.**
> **Cars are useful.**
> **Cars are necessary.**

Naturally, these sentences can be combined with *and* or *but*.

> **Cars are useful and necessary.**
> **Cars pollute but they are useful and necessary.**

Remember that when you combine sentences you may have to change a few words. In this example the word cars has been replaced with they. Combining sentences is a little more complicated than just hooking them together with *and*. As usual, common sense is your best guide.

> If you have forgotten the parts of a sentence, see the ***Review of Basic Grammar***, at the end of the book.

The simplest and most obvious way to make a sentence longer is to redefine a noun with adjectives.

> **Modern, high performance cars pollute but they are useful.**

Use only descriptive adjectives (color, size, shape, etc.) and not words that express an opinion (nice, bad, terrible, etc.) Just present the facts. Your readers can form their own opinions. Phrases are a better way to expand sentences. A phrase can modify a noun, a verb or even a whole sentence.

Modify the noun:

Those ultimate status symbols, cars, are useful but they pollute.

Modify the verb:
Cars pollute the air we breathe but they are useful.

Modify the whole sentence:
Especially in cities, cars pollute the air we breathe.

Usually only one part of any sentence is modified with a phrase. Too many added phrases make a sentence busy or confusing. Even longer sentences should have simple structures.   When you have finished this draft, read it aloud. As we speak we add emphasis to the important part of the sentence by raising our voices, pausing or speaking more carefully. In writing, adding adjectives or phrases gives the same effect but if each part of a sentence is modified, no one part is emphasized. It is like speaking in a monotone. To allow the reader to concentrate on ideas, a report should be easy to read. The familiar patterns of ordinary sentences work best.

<div style="border:1px solid black; padding:10px; width:50%;">

SENTENCES:

combine short ones;

expand with adjectives or phrases;

read aloud when finished.
</div>

WORKING DRAFT - PATTERNS

There are patterns and rhythms in speech and in writing. Ignoring these elements can cause difficulties. Writers can bore readers by using sentences that all sound alike and a monotonous rhythm can hide important information. Often this effect is caused by sentences of the same length and the same structure. Fortunately, it is a problem that is easy to avoid. One way to change the structure is to reverse the order of a sentence.

> **Thomas ate a peach when he got home.**
> **When he got home, Thomas ate a peach.**

Not all sentences can be reversed because changing the order sometimes changes the meaning of the sentence. Reverse the structure only if a pattern is being repeated and the new sentence sounds natural. Another way to vary the structure of a sentence is to add a phrase, one that makes the point clearer or adds new information. Unlike the modifying phrases mentioned above, these phrases can be made from complete sentences.

> **The speech was brief. It caused a sensation.**
> **The speech, a brief one, caused a sensation.**

> **The speech was written on an old envelope. It caused a sensation.**
> **The speech, which was written on an old envelope, caused a sensation.**

Do not add phrases that do nothing more than vary the structure of a sentence. Include information that belongs in the paragraph and is useful to the reader.

The most boring pattern in writing is the rhythm of sentences of the same length. Even when the structure varies, the effect of sentences of the same length can put a reader to sleep. Breaking the rhythm is easy. Change the length of every third sentence.

After two long sentences, write a short one. After two short sentences, use a long one. The trouble with many scholarly papers is that every sentence is complex and long. Long sentences are useful and often necessary when explaining complicated ideas but don't wear out your readers. Give them a chance to breathe. A short sentence adds weight to a point, especially at the beginning or end of a paragraph. Use fewer words for more impact. Ideally your report will have its own rhythm but even a mechanical use of the two-to-one rule will make your writing sound more natural.

Read the finished draft aloud, listening for awkward sentences and to the report as a whole. There are patterns in the ideas of a report as well as in the sounds of the sentences. Examples and quotations are aids to understanding but they also help the rhythm of a report by breaking the steady flow of ideas. Good rhythms in the sentences and a good pattern in the report make the material more interesting. If you don't like what you hear, rewrite it.

EMPHASIS: Modifying any part of a sentence calls the reader's attention to that part and makes it more important You can modify a sentence with an adjective, an adverb or a phrase but choose the part you think is important.
LENGTH Do not use sentences longer than 30 words. Paragraphs are usually about 150 words long. The introduction and conclusion may be shorter.
SENTENCES PATTERNS Vary the structure. Vary the length of sentences, 2 long, 1 short (or 2 short, 1 long). Read aloud when finished

CONNECT THE PARAGRAPHS

The smooth development of a report depends on linking the paragraphs together. A paragraph is like a mini-report and should make sense when read on its own. But to make the report read smoothly each paragraph should also be linked to the next one. These links are called paragraph transitions.

A report is like a freight train that carries a cargo of ideas. The first sentence is like the locomotive, supplying the power and giving direction to the report. The following paragraphs carry the main load of the report, the ideas. Finally, bringing up the rear like a caboose is the conclusion. Just as a train needs strong mechanical couplings, a report won't hold together unless the paragraphs are linked with good transitions.

There are many ways to link paragraphs, some obvious and some subtle. A skilled writer will use more than one kind of transition, including the very basic ones. The most basic, the numbering of paragraphs with figures (1.0, 1.1, 1.2, etc.), appears in some technical manuals but should not be used unless requested. It is more acceptable to write the numbers out or to begin each standard paragraph with a label that indicates the sequence. Examples:

First

    Second...

        Third...

Start with...

    Next...

        Finally...

One way...

    Another way...

        Still another way...

A better way to connect paragraphs is to link the last line of a paragraph with the first line of the next. A key word or a phrase makes a logical link or is simply repeated in the following paragraph. Here is the last line of a paragraph and several possibilities for the beginning of a new one. The transitions are underlined.

    The Holmes experiment proved to be a great success.
    However, the researchers found...
    This theory gained popularity and...

What Holmes didn't know...
The experiment proved another point.

The examples given above are obvious, easy to use, and work well. They are recommended for novice writers.

Experienced writers, or brave beginners, might want to try the less obvious transitions. Instead of a simple label or the echo of a word or phrase, these links depend on abstract associations. Take this example.

The Holmes experiment, to their surprise, was a great success.

Study these suggestions for beginning the next paragraph.
Use parallel sentence structure but not necessarily the same words.

Further tests, with tighter controls, were complete failures.

Use an image.

The celebration did not last long.

Contradict the last thought.

One test does not prove a theory.

Develop the last thought further.

They modified the theory and...

It takes thought to invent abstract transitions but, for anyone who writes a lot, they are worth the extra effort.   Whichever type of transition is used, the paragraphs must be linked together. A report is a vehicle for delivering ideas and it needs strong links between the paragraphs to keep a straight line of development. Experiment to see which transitions serve you best.

BAD SENTENCES

When the working draft is finished and re-read there will almost always be a few bad sentences. Bad sentences can be incomplete, they can run on, or they may just be confusing. When readers find even one incorrect sentence they may decide the writer is an uneducated person whose ideas should not be taken seriously. Even worse, they may stop reading and all your work will be wasted. You may know what each sentence is supposed to mean but you must let your readers in on the secret.

There are techniques for correcting bad sentences. When a machine doesn't work we take it apart to see what's wrong, fix it, and put it back together again. Do the same with sentences. Divide the confusing sentence into short, simple ones. Discard any extra words and phrases. All sentences must have a subject (except commands) and a verb. Some need an object and an indirect object as well. (There is never any excuse for an incomplete sentence!) If the sentence sounds wrong, check it against the *Review of Basic Grammar*, page 37, and make the necessary corrections.

Run-on sentences are a series of short sentences and phrases connected with *ands*, *buts*, and commas. They may be grammatically correct but they are hard to read. If you feel short of breath before you get to the end of a sentence, it is probably a run-on. Fix run-on sentences by dividing and recombining and by using a shared verb when you can.

Example:
> **She sailed on a boat to London and she flew on an airplane to Paris**
> **and then she took a train to Rome.**

Divided and recombined:
> **She sailed to London and flew to Paris.   Then she took a train to Rome.**

Sharing a verb:
> **She took a boat to London, an airplane to Paris, and a train to Rome.**

A sentence sounds better if it is balanced, that is, if the structure of the phrases is repeated.

Sometimes a sentence is confusing but it's hard to see why. Here are some possible reasons and solutions.

1. Wrong word order. It may be ungrammatical or just sound clumsy.   Either way, it must be changed.

Bad sentence: **It was broken the cup on the table.**

Corrected sentence or sentences: **The cup was broken. It was on the table.**

or **The broken cup was on the table**.

or **The cup on the table was broken.**

2. Unclear reference. Keep modifiers next to the things they modify. Don't try to put too much information in a sentence.

When dipped in mustard Sam said the sausage was excellent and cheap too.

(Was Sam dipped in mustard?) It's better to make two sentences.

Sam said the sausage was excellent when dipped in mustard. He also said the sausage was inexpensive.

3. Ambiguous meaning. Ambiguous means that a sentence can be understood in two ways. Make two new sentences and choose the one you mean.

Flying airplanes can be dangerous.

Does that mean that piloting airplanes can be dangerous or that airplanes in flight can be dangerous?

4. Unattached pronoun. Using a pronoun (*this*, *that* or *it*) without being clear can confuse a reader.

The nights are cold and there's not enough food. This is the main problem.

To which idea does the second sentence refer?

Besides the errors in a sentence, one possible mistake lies between sentences. Changing to a new idea within a paragraph without some sort of transition or warning can confuse readers. In a report, clear information is more important than a fancy style.   Listen to your sentences, make the necessary changes, and keep them simple. Don't confuse your readers.

BAD SENTENCE TYPES	
Incomplete	Unattached pronoun
Run-on	Unclear reference
Ambiguous	Wrong word order

STYLE AND THE USE OF LANGUAGE

A reader senses the personality of the writer through writing style and the use of language. Style is the structure, rhythm, and length of sentences, the choice of vocabulary, and the logic of a report. Language usage is the way words and phrases are used. Style controls the general aims of writing and usage takes care of the details.

Do not try to invent a writing style. Let one develop naturally. Just write as well and as clearly as you can. The way you put sentences together and your own way of looking at a problem are your style. Here are some guidelines for a good writing style.

STYLE

DO
Be logical.
Write from one point of view Choose from: I, he, we or 'one'.
Use concrete examples.
Use at least one example or quoted reference in each paragraph.
Always mention the source of facts and quotations.

DON'T
Don't try to amuse your readers.
Don't give your opinion in the report; save it for the conclusion.
Don't use parentheses for comments; they are for brief explanations.

Some of the language we use in everyday conversation cannot be used in writing because it is sub-standard. The slang used in friendly conversation should not be in a report because it changes by age group and by region and is quickly out of fashion. Clichés are expressions that have become boring from overuse. Don't write "on a daily basis", use "everyday". Jargon refers to fashionable words and phrases that mean nothing. Jargon is usually meant to impress others with large or unnecessary phrases. Call a spade a spade, not a digging implement. Do not write "proactive", use "active". Using jargon is a substitute for clear thinking and should be avoided in speaking or in writing. Slang, clichés, and jargon have no place in a report.

Technical language, often a kind of jargon, is a private language understood only by people in the same field of work or study. Each trade and profession has special words to describe its tools, materials, and processes and these terms can be used in technical reports. But caution is advised. Know your audience! Even specialists may not know some unusual terms and it is safer to include a few notes to explain them. When writing for the non-specialist, be even more careful. Simplify the concepts and define those technical words that cannot be avoided.

USAGE

DON'T
use slang, jargon or clichés.
use run-on sentences.
use big words when they're not needed.
use more words than necessary.

DO
Minimize the use of contractions.
Make pronoun references clear.
Avoid excessive repetition of words and phrases: find substitutes.

Whatever you write, think of your audience. Will they understand your language? The use of sub-standard English, slang, and popular jargon says the writer has not thought about his ideas. Be considerate. Write complete sentences and use standard English.

YOUR OWN STYLE

When you find a writer whose style you like, outline a few of his or her paragraphs. Then analyze the sentences for compound and complex structure patterns and the types of adjectives and adverbs. Check for methods of paragraph transitions. After you have identified the techniques of this writer, write a report of your own using these methods. The result will not be an exact copy but you will be on the way to developing your own style.

OTHER KINDS OF WRITING

This book has used a basic, five paragraph essay as a model. Of course, there are other formats for a report and other kinds of writing. There are memos, letters, longer reports, and different designs for reports. In any kind of writing that transmits information the principles are the same. There must be an idea and a plan and paragraphs are always the building blocks of any piece of writing. What is learned from short reports can be transferred to all other written forms.

Memos and letters are the most common form of writing outside the educational system. Memos stay inside a company or organization. Letters are usually sent to people outside the organization. Fax and email are methods of transmitting letters, memos, or notes and do not have formats.

After the addresses, date, and greeting, a letter is like a short report but there are differences. A single sentence stating the purpose of the letter can serve as an introduction. The last paragraph is often just a polite note of thanks and the closing, "Sincerely yours", marks the end of the letter.   A good letter still needs a topic sentence and logical paragraphs. A long letter is like a report to a particular person.

> Examples of memos and letters can be found in many word processing programs.

It is easy to expand the five paragraph outline to create a longer report. The outline model is the same but each paragraph is developed into a small report and each sub-topic is developed into a full paragraph. Using the Planning Sheet provided in this book will produce a fifteen paragraph outline. This process of expansion can be repeated indefinitely. A large report can be constructed from a series of short reports with a common introduction and conclusion.

The model used in this book is not the only good design for a report. It was chosen because it is simple and the techniques of writing are easy to see. As you improve your writing you will develop or discover other formats to suit the needs of the subject. Special areas, such as mathematics and geology, use formats suitable for their work and companies often have their own procedures for written material.

This basic report form is not just a training device. It is a reliable model that can be adapted to any field work or study. When used correctly, it is a good pattern for molding ideas and for presenting information in writing. That is all any report can do.

> **ADVICE**
> We all get tired. There is a time to stop writing, to put the report
> away for a day or two (if you have the time) and work on it later.
> There are also times when it is just better to accept what
> you have done as finished and start on a fresh topic.

THE FINAL DRAFT

MECHANICS

When the working draft is finished to your satisfaction, when the sentences sound right, check the report very, very carefully for errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The mechanical aspects of writing are important and you will have to go over the report three times to make the necessary corrections.

GRAMMAR

When talking to friends it is acceptable to use some bad grammar but on paper the same errors will sound much worse. Go through the report and examine each sentence for grammatical errors. If you have the slightest doubt about a sentence, check it against the *Review of Basic Grammar* on page 37. If that doesn't help, consult a grammar text. A chapter in this book, ***Bad Sentences***, gives a few hints on how to re-build sentences correctly.

SPELLING

Spelling in English can be confusing but it is not difficult to have a report with every word spelled correctly Go over your report and mark each word that might possibly be spelled wrong. Look up each suspect word in a dictionary and make corrections. (Even if you use the spell checker in a word processor, there are words that are spelled correctly but are not correct, for example, *there* and *their*.) See page 31 for a few rules on English spelling and a list of commonly misspelled words. The list is far from complete. A dictionary is always the best help.

PUNCTUATION

Go through the report and find the punctuation errors. When in doubt, look up the rule. There is a guide to punctuation on page 32. Commas are the most common problem in punctuation.   Some modern editors use very few commas and old-fashioned writers sprinkle them everywhere. The common sense solution lies somewhere between the two. Commas are always placed after each word in a series.

Example: She sold apples, pears, peaches, and bananas.

Other uses of the comma are not so clear. A rule of thumb is: a comma is a pause, not a stop. If the meaning is unclear without a pause in speaking, put a comma in.

FORMAT

1. Most schools and universities and many businesses have their own rules for the physical layout of a report and these rules should be followed. If no standards exist, use these rules.
2. Reports are double spaced in schools and universities. Business reports are usually single spaced.
3. If the report is handwritten, write on every second line and take care that every word is legible.

4. Indent all lines of an example or quotation that are two lines or longer.
5. There must be generous margins on all four sides of the page: at least one and a quarter inches. Center the title and the writer's name at the top of the first page of the report.
6. You may prefer a cover sheet giving title, writer's name, date, to whom the report is being submitted and, if appropriate, a very brief description of the contents.
7. Number each page after the first page.

GRAPHICS

At the end of the twentieth century, writing is changing. Writers are adding more graphic images to the straight lines of black text. Computers are playing an important part in this transition. Today's personal computer is a more powerful tool for printing than the commercial presses of just a few years ago and this has changed the appearance of reports. Graphics are the biggest change. The term 'graphics' refers to any pictures, photographs, illustrations, graphs, or tables included in a report. Images help explain ideas but they also break the text and can create interesting visual effects. The imaginative use of graphics can help a reader in a number of ways.

There are three kinds of graphics:
- informational graphics
- decorative images
- text

Informational graphics
Informational graphics are tables, charts, or drawings which are used to support the ideas in a report. When used, graphics should be numbered and referred to in the text. Always keep informational graphics as close as possible to the written idea in the text. For example, word processors can "wrap" the text around a graphic; that is, the lines of text move automatically to go around the graphic. When an illustration is large and must be put on a different page, number it and refer to that number in the text. Graphs and tables are intended to help explain complex or technical ideas and should never be inserted just to impress the reader.

Decorative images
Decorative images vary from a simple company logo, the design that identifies a company, to serious artistic work. Non-functional decoration is used in publishing, advertising, and personal correspondence. Business letters and statements used to be very plain but many companies now use small images to brighten up the page. Until recently decorative art was not usual on commercial correspondence but that is changing. A tasteful image can please the customer and help the company's reputation. When and how decorative images are used is a matter of taste but they should be used carefully. At present, decorative art is not used in academic papers.

Text as graphics
Text can also be used as graphics. Large characters make titles and headings easy to find. A short text on a separate page, perhaps the conclusion of a report, creates an effect that gives importance to the words. Colored graphs and

illustrations attract attention and can be easily reproduced on a word processor or photocopier. To understand the impact of visual patterns, look at the layout of any good magazine. It is the "white space", any empty part of the page, that makes a pattern and attracts the reader. A report, like any written material, is easier to read when it is neat and well designed.

Word processors allow a writer to change printed characters in ways that typewriters cannot. Here are some suggestions on how these effects can be used.

Size of letters

Chapter and section titles can be larger or they can be darker (called **bold**). This makes it easy for the readers to find the sections they want.

Fonts

Font is the style or the shape of the letters. Fonts can be very plain (like Arial) or more elegant. Do not use more than two font styles in a report, although you may change the size more often.

Italics

These slanted letters replace the underline on a typewriter. *Italics* are also used for foreign or unusual words.

Bullets

Bullets, the round black dots that separate items in a list, are one of the new items possible with computerized writing. The general rule for using bullets is:

- Bulleted items that complete the sentence above it are not capitalized and end with a period.
- Bulleted items that are just a list of words or phrases begin with a capital letter and have no end punctuation.
- Complete sentences in a list use normal punctuation.

Graphics usually refer to illustrations but any break in the lines of text changes the look of the page. For this reason, the design of a page is as important as the graphic images and should be carefully done.

THE FINAL CHECK

After all the work of writing and re-writing your report, make one final check to see that you haven't forgotten anything.   When a teacher or friend reads your paper, they can also use this checklist.
(You can photocopy this list for future use.)

CHECKLIST

Plan   ❑

Introduction   ❑

Development   ❑

Examples   ❑

Transitions   ❑

Conclusion   ❑

Sentences   ❑

Grammar   ❑

Word Choice   ❑

Spelling   ❑

Punctuation   ❑

Spacing, margins   ❑

Graphics   ❑

Comments:

SAMPLE OUTLINES

OPINION
Introduction: state the issue
1. Advantages
2. Disadvantages
Conclusion: your opinion

REPORT ON A MEETING
(or Conference)
Introduction: date, time, and place, who attended and the topics
1. General Summary of meeting
2. Important Comments A   (quote if possible)
3. Important Comments B
Conclusion: analysis, and comments

PERSONAL RECOMMENDATION
(Put in letter form.)
Introduction: relationship to the person (teacher, boss, friend);
and how long you have known the person
1. Work habits and abilities
2. Personal traits   (cheerful, dynamic, etc.)
3. Appraisal for future positions
Conclusion: contact me for more information

INSTRUCTIONS
Introduction: what will be explained and why
1. How to start
2. How to operate
3. How to stop
Conclusion: In case of problems...

SALES REPORT
Introduction: period, products, and area
1. Goals set for this month   (by product and cash sales)
2. Actual sales this month
3. Give year-to-date sales and compare this month to previous year
4. Goals for next month
Conclusion: prospects, problems, competition, and recommendations

SPELLING

Here are some rules that will help to improve your spelling but be careful! There are many, many exceptions to the rules. Any word that you doubt, words that don't "look right", should be checked in the dictionary. Do **not** trust your computer spell checker!

RULE 1. Write *i* before *e*
Except after *c*
Or when sounded like *a*
As in **neighbor** and **weigh**.

	priest and **thief**	(exception: *seize*)
and	**deceive** and **receive**	(exception: *science*)

RULE 2. Make plurals by adding *s* or *es*.
Most words take *s*:   **cups**, **cares**
Words ending in *ss, sh, ch,* and *x* take *es* to save the sound.
	churches, guesses, foxes

RULE 3. Words ending in vowel + **y**, add **s** to form the plural**. *valleys, plays***
Vowels are *a, e, i, o, u,* and sometimes *y***.** All other letters are consonants.

RULE 4. To make plural words ending in a consonant + **y**: drop the **y** and add *ies.*
armies, cities

RULE 5. Adding a suffix:
a. If the suffix begins with a vowel,   drop the final *e*.
	care - caring
	love - loving
b. If the suffix begins with a consonant, keep the final *e***.**
	care – careful
	love - lovely
c. If the suffix begins with a consonant and the word ends with a consonant, just add the suffix.
	general - generally
RULE 6. Adding a prefix. Always add the whole prefix to the word.
	mis + spell = misspell
	dis + satisfied = dissatisfied

RULE 7. If you have any doubt at all about spelling, see the dictionary.

HINT: Be careful of words that sound alike but are spelled differently.
its, it's
to, too, two
there, their, they're

PUNCTUATION

In alphabetical order

1. abbreviations	10. *italics*
2. apostrophe.**'**	11. numbers
3. capital letters	12. parentheses **( )**
4. colon **:**	13. period **.**
5. comma **,**	14. question mark **?**
6. dash **--**	15. quotation marks **" "**
7. ellipsis (3 dots) **...**	16. semi-colon **;**
8. exclamation point **!**	17. square brackets **[ ]**
9. hyphen **-**	18. underline

1.   ABBREVIATIONS
Titles: ***Mr. Dr., Jr., St., Sgt., Gen.***
Time: ***AM, PM, BC, AD***
Do not use abbreviations if they are not well known. Unfamiliar abbreviations are written out the first time they are used. After that the letters may be used throughout the text. ***This is the Self Loading Plan (SLP).***

2. APOSTROPHE
a. Contraction: Use the apostrophe in place of missing letters.
it's (it is), *o'clock* (of the clock),
year of '67 (1967)

b. Possession:
singular nouns, add apostrophe + **s**:
> **day's end**
> **mouse's tail**
singular nouns ending in s: add apostrophe + **s**: :
> **Jones's locker**
(but when pronunciation is difficult, just add the apostrophe: **Moses'**)
plural nouns ending in **s**, apostrophe only: **both girls' toys**
plural nouns not ending in s, add apostrophe + s: **sheep's**
joint possession, add apostrophe + s to last owner:
> **John and Jim's car**
individual possession, add apostrophe + s to each owner:
> **Joe's and Jim's cars** (two cars)
hyphenated words, add apostrophe + s to last word:
> **son-in-law's car**

c. Plural of numbers, letters, and words out of context, use apostrophe + s: **'s.**
> The code had three **9's** in it.
> There are four **s's** in possession.

Don't use three **and's** in a sentence.

3. CAPITAL LETTERS
a. Sentences
Capitalize the first word of every sentence including quotations.
He said, "She'll be back."

b. Capitalize the greeting and closing phrase of a letter like this.
Dear Sir,   Yours truly,   Yours sincerely,
Note: use small letter for truly, sincerely, etc.

c. Capitalize names of
people	**Fred, the Smiths**
nationalities	**Danes, Scots**
ethnic groups	**Arabs, Eskimos**
languages	**French, English**
organizations	**the Green Party**
days and months	**Monday, May**
historical events	**World War I**
holidays	**Easter, May Day**
places	**Oak Street, Paris, Utah, Italy, Asia**
ships, aircraft	**the Titanic, the Enola Gay**
titles	**Doctor Smith, Captain Lee**
abbreviations	**C.I.O, U.S.A, E.C.**

d. Capitalize important words in publications and works of art
(and italicize or underline the whole title).
For Whom the Bell Tolls
The Man with a Hoe

4. COLON
The colon is used to introduce a list.
Send the following: three tigers, two lions, and one whip.
The colon separates certain standard items like time and reference.
9:15 A.M.
Genesis 4:21

5. COMMA
a. The comma separates items in addresses and dates.
Sunday, December 7, 1941
429 Park Street, Los Angeles, CA.

b. The comma separates items in a list.
His tie was red, green, blue, and white.
Note: Use a comma before **etc.** in a series.

c. The comma separates a phrase from a sentence.

> **Feeling tired, he took a bus.**
The bus, an old one, was very slow.

d. A comma sets off direct quotations from a sentence.
> **"Yes," she said, "you're right."**

6. DASH
Do not use the dash except for titles.

7. ELLIPSIS (3 dots ...)
An ellipsis indicates an unfinished sentence or an omission in the sentence.
Avoid using the ellipsis.

8. EXCLAMATION POINT
The exclamation point is used to show very strong emotion.
> **"My word!" he said.**
The exclamation point should not be used except in dialogue and quoted statements.

9. HYPHEN
A hyphen is used for:
standard compound words: **sister-in-law**
compound adjectives: **square-cut board**
compound numbers (21-99):   **twenty-one**
prefixes: **ex-wife**

A hyphen is used to prevent mis-readings. Compare:
He caught 500 inch worms. (These are worms that are 500 inches long.)
He caught 500 inch-worms. (He caught 500 creatures called "inch-worms".)

A hyphen is used to divide words into syllables at the end of a line.
See a dictionary for the correct way to break a particular word into syllables.

10. ITALICS
Italics are used to set apart unusual items and for titles. Traditionally italics were used only by printers but most computer word processors allow italics.
See **Underline** for correct use.

11. NUMBERS
There are cardinal numbers (one) and ordinal numbers (first).

a. A number is written out for:
one or two words: **three pistons, four hundred clowns**
ordinal numbers under 100: **seventh, forty-ninth, one-third**
compound words: **forty-hour week**

b. Figures are used for numbers of three or more words.
> **472 pills, 11,472 helmets**

c. For accuracy use both words and figures.
Please pay forty dollars ($40)

d. Put a comma between each three digits (starting from the right)
except for dates, addresses, and telephone numbers.
2,453,478
May 1, 1917
181 Oak Street
telephone **495-2936**

e. Never begin a sentence with a figure: use words for the number instead of figures.

12. PARENTHESES (singular: parenthesis) are used for:
a. directions: The graph **(figure 17)** shows the trend.
b. uncertainty: He was born in 1272 **(?).**
c. accuracy: Please pay forty dollars **($40)**.
d. numbering a list: Please state your **(1)** name, **(2)** age, and **(3)** address.
e. extra material   He claimed we could not meet a payroll **(Not true!)** and that we
have big debts.

13. PERIOD
A period is used at the end of a sentence and after abbreviations which are not
capitalized. Most people accept computer spell checker standards.
Intro., fig., e.g., etc., USA, UN, PM, COBOL MA, but PhD. Names: P. D. Smith.

 Dr., Mr., UN, USA

14. QUESTION MARK
The question mark is used after a direct question or to show uncertainty.
Are you okay?
He died in Genoa in 1283(?).

15. QUOTATION MARKS
a. Quotation marks are used when quoting words exactly.
"I have been to the mountain," he said.
(Note the position of the comma: the period is not used in the quote.)

b. Quotation marks are used for songs, poems, chapters, and articles.
She sang Cole Porter's **"Love for Sale."**
(Do not use quotation marks for books, magazines or newspapers: use underline.)

c. Quotation marks are used for unusual words or phrases.
She said he was **"kooky".**

d. Quotation marks are used for the subdivisions of published works like book
chapters, short reports, poems, and songs.
See the chapter of this book entitled "Graphics".

16. SEMI-COLON

The semi-colon separates items in a series when each item has its own punctuation.

**The winners are: Jane, for best actress; Henry, for best director;
and Sam, for richest producer.**

17. SQUARE BRACKETS

Square brackets are used to enclose editorial remarks, errors in quoted material
and stage directions in plays.

Columbus landed in 1942 [should be 1492]

If your typewriter doesn't have brackets, use parentheses.

18. **UNDERLINE** Use in place of italics when handwriting or on a typewriter.
a. Underline titles of books, magazines, and newspapers.

<u>A Farewell to Arms</u>   <u>Reader's Digest</u>   <u>London Times</u>

Do not underline songs, poems or magazine articles: use quotation marks.

b. Underline words for emphasis.

<u>Do not turn this valve</u>.

c. Underline foreign words.

The army staged a <u>coup d'etat</u>.

d. Underline names of ships, aircraft, and works of art.

**<u>the Mary Rose</u>
<u>the Enola Gay</u>
<u>the David</u>**

e. Underline symbols, numbers, and words used in a special sense.

**His <u>1's</u> look like <u>7's.</u>
Take out the <u>and</u>.**

REVIEW OF BASIC GRAMMAR

WORDS are classified according to their most common use.

noun	a person, place, idea or object	*door*
pronoun	replaces a noun	*she, him, it*
adjective	modifies a noun	*red*
verb	describes an action	*push*
	or states a condition	*is*

Verb types: (see below: Sentence Structure)
   1. intransitive
   2. descriptive
   3. action or transitive

adverb	modifies a verb or an adjective	*gently, very*
preposition	relates a noun to another word	*on, in*
conjunction	connects words, phrases, and sentences	*and, but*
article	indicates an item within a group	*a, an, the*

Example: *He pushed very gently on the red door and went in.*

Most words can be used in more than one word class.
Swimming is good exercise.   (verb used as a noun)
She penned a letter to her friend.   (noun used as a verb)

PHRASES Any part of a sentence may be a phrase.
The *red-haired girl* is a mechanic.
She *worked very hard*.
She fixed *the old, green car.*

PHRASES modify nouns, verbs or sentences.
Mary, *the red-haired girl*, jumped in the river.   (modifies a noun)
She ran, *splashing happily*, through the water.   (modifies the verb)
When it was dark, the children went home.   (modifies the sentence)

SENTENCES consist of nouns and verbs, their modifiers, and connectors.
Modifiers are adjectives and adverbs. Connectors are prepositions, conjunctions and articles.
The meaning of a word in a sentence is determined by its position.
The parts of a sentence are: subject, usually before the verb; verb, the action; and a description of the
subject or an object, the thing acted upon, usually placed to the right of the verb.

subject	verb	object	indirect object	description
She	*works.*			
She	*fixed*	*the car.*		
He	*gave*	*money*	*to her.*	
She	*is*			*a mechanic.*

SENTENCE STRUCTURE is determined by the type of verb.
   1. Intransitive, shows action, does not have an object.   *She works.*
   2. Intransitive, descriptive.   *She is a mechanic.*
   3. Transitive, action: needs an object, may have an indirect object.   *He kicked the ball.*
                                                                                                         He kicked the ball to Sally.

To expand a sentence and add emphasis::	Simple sentence *Sally was alone*.
1. Replace a part of the sentence with a phrase.	*The blond girl was alone.*
2. Add modifiers (adjectives) to a word.	*Poor little Sally was alone.*
3. Modify a word with a phrase.	*Sally, the blonde girl, was alone.*
4. Modify the sentence with a phrase (complex sentence).	*When night came, Sally was alone.*
5. Join two sentences (compound sentence).	*The night was dark and Sally was alone.*