Chapter: 5

The Written Word

I write when I'm inspired, and I see to it that I'm inspired at nine o'clock every morning
(Peter De Vries)

'Sex, romance, thrills, burlesque, satire, farce ... most enjoyable.'

'Here is everything one expects from this author but thricefold and three times as entertaining as anything he has written before.'

'A wonderful tissue of outrageous coincidences and correspondences, teasing elevations of suspense and delayed climaxes.'

(reviews of *Small World* by David Lodge)

This has nothing to do with management writing. No management report will ever get such reviews. The most significant point about management writing is that it is totally different from the writing most people were taught – and if you do not recognize and understand this difference, then your management writing will always miss the mark.

Since writing is so vital a part of your work, you can easily recoup time spent on enhancing your writing skills in the time that this will save in actually writing. Thus a small effort on the process of writing itself will make you far more efficient, and make writing a pleasure rather than a chore. This chapter examines the objectives of management writing and outlines a methodical approach which will enable anyone to produce the really great works of management literature.

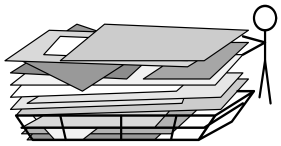
5.1 Management Writing

As a manager, your writing has two major roles:

- to clarify (for both writer and reader)
- to convey information

It is this deliberate, dual aim which should form the focus for all your writing activity.

Writing is the predominant means of communication within an organization. Paper is thought to be the major product of most professionals. Some estimate that up to third of managerial work-time is engaged in written communication. Thus it is absolutely vital for you as a manager to develop actively the skill of writing not only because of the time involved in writing, but also because your project's success may depend upon it. Indeed, since so much of the communication between you and more senior management occurs in writing, your whole career may depend upon its quality.



There are many uses for paper within an organization. Some are inefficient, but the power of paper must not be ignored because of that. In relation to a project, documentation provides a means to clarify and explain on-going development, and to plan the next stages. Memoranda are a simple mechanism for suggestions, instructions and general organization. The minutes of a meeting form a permanent and definitive record. Writing is a central part of any planning activity; the quality is improved since writing an explanation of the plan forces the planner to consider and explore it fully. For instance, if you habitually include a section entitled 'Methods of Monitoring', then you will force yourself to consider and solve the problems involved in tracking a project. Plans which work just 'because they do' may not; plans whose operation is explained in writing may also fail, but the review will be far quicker since the (documented) plan is thought-out and accessible to all.

Management writing has very little to do with much of the composition and literature learnt at school: the objectives are different, the audience has different needs, and the rewards can be far greater. As a manager, you write for very distinct and restricted purposes, which are best achieved through simplicity.

It is all a question of aim. A novel entertains. It forces the reader to want to know 'what happens next'. On the other hand, a management report is primarily designed to convey information. The manager's job is helped if the report is interesting, but time is short and the sooner the meat of the document is reached, the better. The novel would start: 'The dog grew ill from howling so ...'; the manager's report would start (and probably end): 'The butler killed Sir Arnold Hepplethwaite in the library with a twelve-inch carving knife'.

In school you are taught to display knowledge. The more information and argument, the more marks. In industry, it is totally different. Here the wise manager must extract only the significant information and support it with only the minimum-necessary argument. The expertise is used to filter the information and so to remove inessential noise. The manager as expert provides the answers to problems, not an exposition of past and present knowledge. You use your knowledge to focus upon the important points.

When you approach any document, follow this simple procedure:

1) Establish the AIM
2) Consider the READER
3) Devise the STRUCTURE
4) DRAFT the text
5) EDIT and REVISE

That is it. For the rest of this chapter, we will expand upon these points and explain some techniques to make the document effective and efficient – but these five stages (all of them) are what you need to remember.

> *To Practise 5.1:* It is worth actually writing a document as you go through this chapter. Choose something which needs to be done, and which is fairly short (so that you can concentrate on the process of writing).

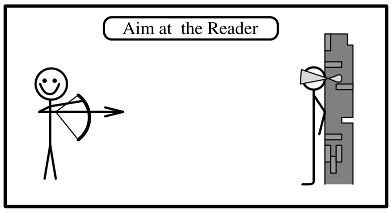
5.2 Initial Planning

Aim
You start with your *aim*. Every document must have a single aim – a specific, *specified* reason for being written. If you cannot think of one, do something useful instead. If you cannot decide what the document should achieve, it will achieve nothing.

This emphasis upon a single aim is an exaggeration, but only a slight one. The majority of documents you produce will be read only once and quickly. Thus if you are to communicate anything that is remembered, you must focus very strongly upon that point. Typically, you will need to support what you say with argument, facts, conjectures. But essentially you get to make effectively only one point per document.

> *To Practise 5.2:* What is the aim of your document? Need it be written? Have you checked?

The Reader
Once you have established your aim, you must then decide what information is necessary in achieving that aim. The reader wants to find the outcome of your thoughts; apply your expertise to the available information, pick out the very few facts which are relevant, and state them precisely and concisely.



A document tells somebody something. As the writer, you have to decide what to tell and how best to tell it to the particular audience; you must consider the reader. There are three considerations:

- what they already know affects what you can leave out.
- what they need to know determines what you include.
- what they want to know suggests the emphasis of your writing.

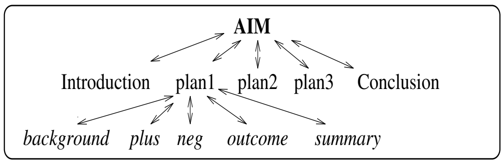
If the reader lacks background information, then the writer must supply it; conversely, if the reader already knows a great deal, the writer should not repeat this except to recall the information in the reader's mind. Thus, in deciding which facts are relevant, the wise manager must consider 'relevance' in terms of the reader.

In constructing the order and the emphasis of the document, the writer must consider what the reader wants to achieve. This then becomes the guide in determining the emphasis and opening – so that the reader's concentration is won quickly. For instance, in a product proposal, marketing will want to see the product's differentiation and niche in the market place; finance will be interested in projected development costs, profit margins and risk analysis; and R&D will want the technical details of the design. To be most effective, you may need to produce three different reports for the three different audiences.

> *To Practise 5.3: Write down* (in your notebook) who is the victim. Thinking specifically about that person, sketch the corresponding knowledge for the three considerations above.

Structure
Writing is very powerful – and for this reason, you can exploit it. The power comes from its potential as an efficient and effective means of communication: the power is derived from order and clarity. Structure is used to display that order and clarity, and to present the information so that it is more accessible to the reader.

It all comes down to the problem of the short attention span. You have to provide the information in small manageable chunks, and to use the structure of the document to maintain the context. This process is known as hierarchical decomposition (a good example of unnecessary jargon – see later). Basically, you take the information you need to convey and you split it up to help the reader to put it all back together again. The following diagram illustrates how an aim might be decomposed in this way.



While still considering the aim and the reader, the document is broken down into distinct sections which can be written (and *read*) separately. These sections are then each further decomposed into subsections (and sub-subsections) until you arrive at simple, small units of information – which are expressed as a paragraph.

Every paragraph in your document should justify itself; it should serve a purpose, or be removed. A paragraph should convey a single idea. There should be a statement of that key idea and (possibly) some of the following:

- a development of the idea
- an explanation or analogy
- an illustration
- support with evidence
- contextual links to reinforce the structure

> *To Practise 5.4:* Break your aim down into the first layer of sections, and *write* these in your notebook.

As managers, though, you are allowed to avoid words entirely in places; diagrams are often much better than written text. Whole reports can be written with them almost exclusively and you should always consider using one in preference to words. Not only do diagrams convey some information more effectively, but often they assist in the analysis and interpretation of the data. For instance, a pie chart gives a quicker comparison than a list of numbers; a simple bar chart is far more intelligible than the numbers it represents. The only problem with diagrams is that the writer often places less effort in their design than their information-content merits – and so some is lost or obscure. They must be given due care: add *informative* labels and titles, highlight any key entries, remove unnecessary information.

> *To Practise 5.5:* Devise a diagram to illustrate/illuminate one aspect of your document.

5.3 Draft, Revise and Edit

When you have decided what to say, to whom you are saying it, and how to structure it, say it – and then check it for clarity and effectiveness. The time spent doing this will be far less than the time wasted by other people struggling to read your document's first draft.

The key point is that writing is about conveying information – *conveying*; that means it has to get there. Your writing must be right for the reader, or it will be lost on its journey. You must focus upon enabling the reader's access to the information. The following are a few ideas to consider when you wield the red pen over a newly created opus.

Layout
Layout should be used to make the structure plain, and so more effective: it acts as a guide to the reader. The main difference between written and verbal communication is that the reader can choose and re-read the various sections, whereas the listener receives information in the sequence determined by the speaker. Thus your various sections should each have informative titles so that the reader can understand the structure and choose quickly what to read.

Suppose you have three main points to make. Do not hide them within simple text – make them obvious. Make it so that the reader's eye jumps straight to them on the page. For instance, the key to effective layout is to use:

- informative titles
- white space

☞ variety

Another way to make a point obvious is to *use a different type face*.

Style
People in business do not have the time to marvel at your florid turn of phrase or alluring alliteration. They want to know what the document is about and (possibly) what it says; there is no real interest in style, *except* for ease of access.

In some articles a summary can be obtained by reading the first sentence of each paragraph. The remainder of each paragraph is simply an expansion upon, or explanation of, the initial sentence. In other writing, the topic is given first in a summary form, and then successively repeated with greater detail each time. This is the pyramid structure favoured by newspapers.

A really short and simple document is likely to be read. This has led to the 'memo culture' in which every communication is condensed to one side of A4. Longer documents need to justify themselves to their readers' attention.

A variation on this is the practice of prefacing any long document with an *executive summary* which allows the 'executive' to obtain the main message of your document in a short space of time (equivalent to reading a memo). Such a section is useful because many people are flattered by being treated as executives and will respond by acting professionally (i.e. by actually reading it). An alternative observation is that if the executive is only going to read the first page, then save trees and keep the document to that size in the first place.

The Beginning
Let us imagine the reader. Let us call her Ms X.

Ms X has a lot to do today. She has to prepare for a meeting tomorrow with the regional VP, to make a call to the German design office, and to dictate several letters concerning safety regulations. This month's process-data has failed to reach her. She is busy and distracted. You have possibly twenty seconds for your document to justify itself to her. If by then it has not explained itself and convinced her that she needs to read it – Ms X will tackle something else. If Ms X is a good manager, she will insist on a rewrite; if not, the document may never be read.

Thus, the beginning of your document is crucial. It must be obvious to the reader *at once* what the document is about, and why it should be read. You need to catch the reader's attention but with greater subtlety than this chapter; few management reports can begin with the word *sex*. Unlike a novel, the management document must not contain 'teasing elevations of suspense'. Take your 'aim', and either state it or achieve it by the end of the first paragraph. For instance, if you have been evaluating a new software package for possible purchase then your reports might begin: 'Having evaluated the McBlair Design Suite, I recommend that ...'.

The beginning and end receive the greatest attention

The End
The last section of the document is so often a 'summary and conclusions' that people who read a lot of reports will habitually read the introduction and then cut straight to the last section. If you do not do this yourself, try it; it can save lots of time.

Since this is the case, what does common sense tell you about the ending?

The end is your last chance to restate the conclusive evidence which leads the reader to the evident conclusion you wish to be remembered. Write it with care, and certainly not in the last-minute rush to get the (blo%#*) document finished. If anything gets a rewrite, it should be the beginning-and-end.

Punctuation
Punctuation is used to clarify meaning and to highlight structure. It can also remove ambiguity: a cross section of customers can be rendered less frightening by adding a simple hyphen (a cross-section of customers).

Managers tend not to punctuate – which deprives us of this simple tool. Despite what some remember from school, punctuation has simple rules which lead to elegance and easy interpretation. American and British punctuation are subtly different, but the premise is the same: punctuation aids the reader. Since this is your aim at the moment, try to find a good dictionary (of the chosen variant of English) and read the summary of punctuation which will be lurking in the appendices. Next, apply this new-found wealth to analysing the punctuation in a quality magazine (e.g. *The Economist*) and develop your own style.

For now, let us look at two uses of two punctuation marks. If you do not habitually use these already, add them to your repertoire by deliberately looking for opportunities in your next piece of writing.

The two most common uses of *the Colon* are:

1) to introduce a list which explains, or provides the information promised in, the previous clause:

A manager needs two planning tools: prescience and prayer.

2) to separate main clauses where the second explains or exemplifies the first:

Life is like a sewer: what you get out of it, depends on what you put in.

The two most common uses of *the Semicolon* are:

1) to unite sentences that are closely associated, complementary or parallel:

Writing is a skill; one must practise to improve a skill.

Managers manage; accountants account for the cost.

2) to act as a stronger comma, either for emphasis or to establish a hierarchy:

The report was a masterpiece; of deception and false promises.

The teams were Tom, Martha and Harry; and Mandy, Dick and Mary.

Spelling
For some, spelling is a constant problem. In the last analysis, incorrect speling distracts the reader and detracts from the authority of the author. Computer spell-checking programs provide great assistance, especially when supported by a good dictionary. Chronic spellers should always maintain a (preferably alphabetical) list of corrected errors, and try to learn new rules (and exceptions!). For instance, (in British English) advice-advise, device-devise, licence-license, practice-practise each follow the same pattern: the –ce is a noun, the –se is a verb; American English is generally more relaxed about the whole affair.

Simple Errors
For important documents, there is nothing better than a good, old-fashioned proof-read, especially if undertaken by someone else. As an example, the following comes from a national advertising campaign/quiz run by a famous maker of Champagne:

Question 3: Which Country has one the Triple Crown the most times?

Won understands the error but is ill impressed by that company's concern for quality.

Sentence Length
Avoid long sentences. We tend to associate 'unit of information' with 'a sentence'. Consequently when reading, we process the information when we reach the full stop. If the sentence is too long, we lose the information either because of our limited attention span or because the information was poorly decomposed to start with and might, perhaps, have been broken up into smaller, or possibly better punctuated, sentences which would better have kept the attention of the reader and, by doing so, have reinforced the original message with greater clarity and simplicity.

Word Length
It is inappropriate to utilize verbose and bombastic terminology when a suitable alternative would be: to keep it simple. Often the long, complex word will not be understood. Further, if the reader is distracted by the word itself, then less attention is paid to the meaning or to the information you wish to convey.

A Little Difference
There are no dull subjects. There are only dull writers.
(H L Mencken)

We remember the surprising, not the mundane. If your document is to be effective, it (and your main point) should be made memorable. To achieve this is the challenge. As with formal presentations (chapter 2), you should construct a *hook* upon which the reader will fix and which is associated with your main message. For instance,

this need not be dramatic, merely different

and a simple change of layout may suffice. Alternatively, you could introduce a quirky turn of phrase or something outwith the established pattern of the document since the jingle of change is as good as a rest.

A simple approach is to construct a phrase to encapsulate your message, and let it repeat itself once or twice in the text, possibly with variations, since through that repetition we remember the sound *and* the message.

Jargon
I believe that a digital human-computer-interface data-entry mechanism should be called a keyboard; I don't know why, but I do.

Wordiness
When one is trying hard to write an impressive document, it is easy to slip into grandiose formulae: words and phrases which sound significant but which convey little but noise.

You must exterminate. So: 'for the reason that' becomes 'because'; 'with regards to' becomes 'about'; 'in view of the fact that' becomes 'since'; 'within a comparatively short period of time' becomes 'soon'.

Often you can make a sentence *sound* more like spoken English simply by changing the word order and adjusting the verb. So: 'if the department experiences any difficulties in the near future regarding attendance of meetings' becomes 'if staff cannot attend any of the next few meetings'. As a final check, read out your document aloud; if it sounds odd, change it.

To Practise 5.6: Now you must write your document – twice. First, write a short document (about 50 words) which says it all. Second, write a full length version (500-2000 words) with careful attention to all the above points. Do a quick first draft following the structure already decided in a previous exercise, and then revise and edit.

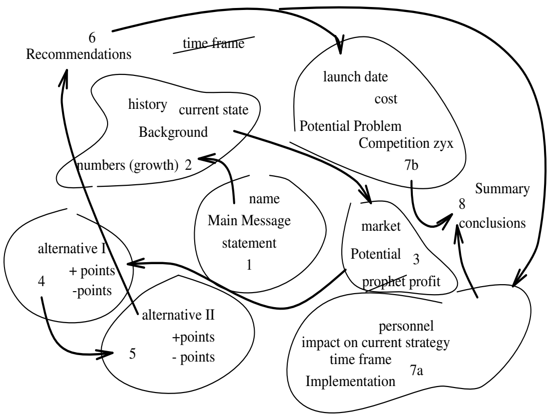
5.4 Getting Started

Composing a new document can be difficult. The idea of starting with a main theme and breaking this down into nicely ordered sections and subsections all depends upon you having nicely ordered mind – and a lot of people do not. This is not a slur on their intelligence, but rather a recognition that some creative imaginations work faster than the logical mind can order the thoughts.

For such people, the order of the hierarchical decomposition can be replaced with the anarchy of a *spider chart* (as shown on the next page). A spider chart is an initially blank piece of paper upon which you write your ideas as fast as they emerge. A safe place to start is at the centre of the page with the main *aim* of the document – and then start scribbling ideas all over. The only real proviso is that each new idea should be written next to any related ideas which are already on the chart. When the ideas stop flowing, draw rings around groups of ideas, number them in the order you might present them, and review your artistry.

To Practise 5.7: Spider charts can also be used in group discussions as a variant of brainstorming. Consider what difference (if any) this grouping of ideas might have on the 'flow' of a brainstorming session.

Once you have determined the structure, either by hierarchical decomposition or by trained spiders, you can further plan the document by considering its length. For any work-related document, there will be considerable precedent as to how long it is expected to be. Your aim should be a document of about 80% this size since you will be writing in a *clear, concise* style. With the size of the total document decided, consider the relative importance of the different sections and assign a target length to each. In this way, you have broken down the task of the large document into a set of smaller tasks which can then be written independently. For many people, these will seem less daunting. With a little practice, you will soon get the hang of writing to a fixed length and this can actually help since it often determines whether individual ideas are excluded or expanded to make the section length correspond to its importance.



5.5 A Small Assignment

Writing is a complex tool. You need to train yourself in its use or a large proportion of your activity will be grossly inefficient. You should reflect upon your writing lest it reflect badly upon you.

> *To Practise 5.8:* Consider the following text (written by a student). Rewrite it so that the information is immediately accessible to the reader.

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There are two main points that I have learn't from this project about design practise. The first is the importance in thinking about what you are doing and taking time to plan through what you will do rather than jumping straight into a problem. I also learn't the importance of doing a through investigation before you enter the design stage, by when it may be too late to correct your design. I have also learn't the advantages in testing as you go along rather than at the end. Furthermore the importance in trying to keep good notes and records rather than scribbling down an idea with no explanation so that the next time you look at it you can't work out whats going on.

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Of course, nothing you write would be that bad. Nothing you put on paper would be anything less than clear/accessible. So to convince yourself of the need for this practice of Revise-and-Edit, take the last three documents which landed on your desk and answer the following:

1) What was the document trying to tell you? (in one sentence)
2) Rewrite paragraphs two-to-four in a clearer, more succinct manner.
3) Is the conclusion clearly stated? (re-state it if not)
4) Do you know exactly what you were meant to do once you had read the document (i.e. why was it sent to you in the first place)?
5) Could the message have been relayed more efficiently?

And when you have thus exercised your critical judgement, apply it in the same manner to the last document *you* produced.

Returning to the poor paragraph above, I offer the following comments. There are two levels of error. The first is dealt with simply by using a red pen and attacking the typos, spelling, punctuation and a few of the links between the sentences. The second level requires a good look at the structure and aim of the whole piece, and at how this can be made plain to the reader. If you have not yet done the exercise, pause and do it now. A possible reworking might look as follows:

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There are four main points-of-practice which emerged during this project:

- take time to think and plan before jumping in
- investigate the design thoroughly before implementing it (when it is too late for corrections)
- test as you go along rather than at the end
- keep good notes rather than scribbles (which will tell you nothing later)

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This 'fair' solution uses (mostly) the original words and ideas, but with the structure reflected in the layout. Notice that the 'good' ideas are all lined up on the left hand side so that the reader can just pick them off one by one. The point is that the student did have four(!) good points – but without a little revision, they did not impress themselves quickly upon the reader.

The above example demanded a complete rewrite – mostly your documents merely need a bit of polishing. If your documents are produced on a word-processor, then you have no excuse. Get a first draft printed out, double-spaced, and sit quietly in the corner (with coffee, doughnuts and red pen) to revise and edit carefully. At one level, look particularly for the flow of ideas between paragraphs and the merits of the overall structure; at the lower level, check for spelling and punctuation. Each word might be replaced with a simpler one; each phrase may allow a better idiom; each concept may be better expressed and/or illustrated; if a word offends thee, pluck it out. If you do this with each document, *you learn* to write better and so will recoup the time in faster composition and revision in the future. This is effective management of your own time and skills development.

Improving writing skills is possible for any manager no matter how good (or bad) you are already. As with all such skills, it is simply a case of deliberate effort. As a start, there are many reference books where points of style and correct usage are explained in detail – your team should have access to these books, and you should be seen to use them yourself. Using the company's money (which is always fun) buy two or three such guides and put them in the office where they can be seen. If in doubt, ask a secretary to purchase them for you; he/she is likely to recognize what will be most helpful.

As an exercise, you should now write a couple of short pieces purely to focus upon the process of writing. The task is to rewrite this chapter. The first document is to be less than one-side of A4 (typed, single spaced): a maximum of 500 words; the second document is five times that size (2000-2500 words) and should be aimed at an audience composed purely of people like Arnold (whose documents you have to read). These compositions are not simply condensed versions of this chapter. You have to extract the information and rewrite it in your own style and words within the specified limits; you will have to be selective in deciding what to include and what to exclude.

As a practical step forward, use this chapter and any other reference material to devise a 'checklist' for revising and editing first drafts. Write it as a step-by-step procedure for examining documents with an emphasis on ease of use rather than completeness (i.e. do not try to copy out every rule of grammar). Under no circumstances should you call it a documentation standard, or no one will ever read it. Instead, call it something like a help-list or a fast-checker. Either circulate this around your team asking for comments and suggestions, or simply leave copies lying around your desk (or next to the reference books) where they will be noticed.

To play *Watch the Manager* you simply have to read each document that finishes on your desk with a pencil in your hand. When the writing goes wrong, put a line through the offending passage; when something is done particularly well, circle it with a tick in the margin. If the document comes from your team, always praise the best aspect; occasionally, you should suggest improvements.

If you want one message to take from this chapter, take this: a manager's writing should be clear, complete and concise. If your document satisfies these three criteria, then it deserves to be read.