

# Writing for the '90s

BY BROOKE BROADBENT

**W**RITERS' BLOCK can cause adults to become unglued. It can completely undermine your self-confidence and make you hope you never see another writing project. But there are ways to get unblocked. A friend of mine, a former instructor, overcomes writers' block by anticipating readers' questions and starting her writing with those in mind. For example, she knows from her classroom experience that many adults learn by comparing new knowledge to what they already know.

When I have a writing assignment—a training manual, an article, or whatever—I try to overcome writers' block by writing the first thoughts that come to mind. I avoid writing sentences and simply sketch my ideas with words and phrases. Organizing the order of my thoughts comes much later. I do plenty of editing at the outline phase. I polish my prose after I am sure of the flow of ideas.

That approach may be too mechanical; you may prefer to be more spontaneous. You might be a visual person that prefers to draw diagrams and flowcharts of your ideas before writing them out. The important step is to get started, as soon as possible. Unblock the writer inside of you.

## Writing tips

Writing well is a skill. It's like learning to use a computer well. Both require determination, practice, and, when your system freezes, the patience to start all over. The first step in improving your writing is to place value on it. That will help you to find the time required to carefully plan, review, and revise your writing.

The second step is to set some personal standards. Writing in plain language means writing clear, crisp, simple prose. One way to achieve that standard is to bring your writing in line with your speaking. Try this. Listen to yourself as you speak. You probably hear short, simple sentences, and vivid images. This is the plain language you need in your writing. Look at your



writing. Do your sentences contain more than 25 words? Are your ideas abstract, with no examples? Are your sentences complex and full of conjunctions and adjectives—like which, while, that—all making it harder to follow your main idea?

Another writing tip is to edit, edit, edit. Editing is the most important ingredient of skillful writing. In rereading your material, you will probably notice some gaps. You might want to try four levels of editing.

The first level of editing comes from your “in-house” editors: your editor-partner, your editor-friends, and, perhaps, your editor-children. You can show your “family-editors” a first draft, or portions of it, and ask for feedback. Members of my nonprofessional entourage have provided sage advice over the years. Recently I showed a few paragraphs of an article about the Internet to my adult daughter. Her swift reaction: “Dad, I’m tired of reading about the Internet, I want to do it,” sent me back to the drawing board. I drafted an interactive article that now appears on our family Web page.

The tools for a second-level edit come bundled with high-level word

processors. These are editing tools to check spelling, grammar, punctuation, and style. They suggest ways to rewrite your text. But the author always remains in control. When the software suggests changes, you decide which ones to incorporate or reject.

After letting your “chef d’oeuvre” sit for a few days, weeks, or even months, you’re probably ready to do a third-level edit—poring over every word, sentence, and paragraph. Don’t hold back the red ink. Make your final changes and do another spellcheck and grammar review with your word processing software. *Et voila, c’est fini.* Unless you are writing for a publication with editing services.

Most publications engage wordsmiths to do a fourth-level edit to make the article follow the publication’s official style. Normally they make changes to the final text without consulting you. By the fourth edit, you have probably lost your creative zeal so you may be happy to hand the entire project to a professional for finalizing.

Like me, you probably write most of the time for internal and external clients and not for publication. So let’s get back to the real world. Having tamed your writers’ block and thoroughly edited your piece, the process of putting your text into a document may stand between you and a final product. In the 1990s, document production is the domain of computers—what some Luddites consider the yucky stuff.

## Using your computer

Personal computers and software are to writers in the nineties what pens and paper were to our parents. If you complain about the “feel” of writing with a PC, then maybe you should not try to change. However, if there is any chance of your adapting to the digital world, you should give it a serious try.

Over time, knowledge of computers will help you work more productively, will keep you competitive with computer-savvy rivals, and will show



## ■ Training 101

your clients you're up-to-date. At a minimum, learn all you can about one word processing software package, like WordPerfect, Ami Pro, or Microsoft Word. Master features like spellcheck, the thesaurus, grammar check, outline feature, styles, table of contents, and tables. Advanced word processing features will help you write correctly-spelled, well-organized, attractive documents. Learning software in the Microsoft Windows environment or on a Mac is a real advantage because your knowledge and skills on one application (WordPerfect) is readily transferable to another (Microsoft Word).

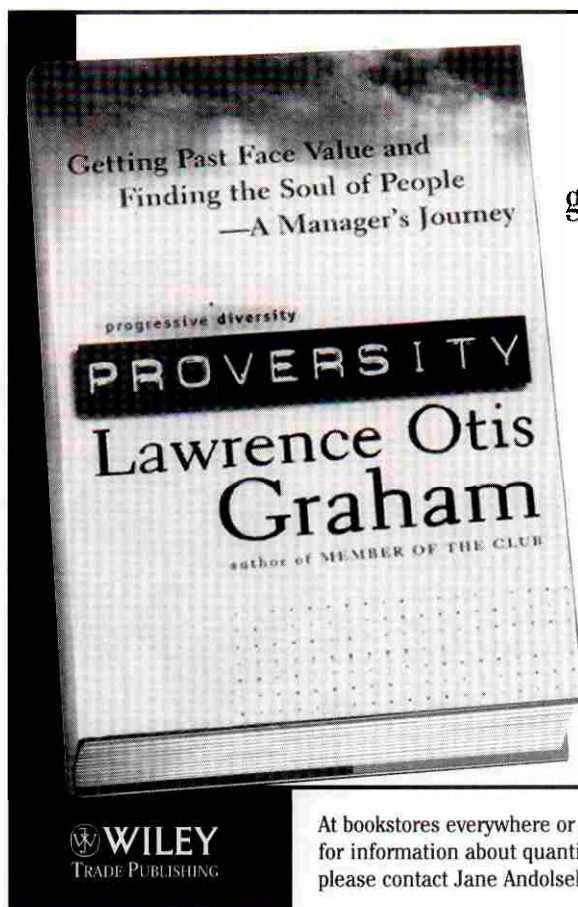
PCs have simplified the writing process by empowering you to control all phases—right at the desktop. The price of progress is that you have to learn how to use the hardware and software that make this possible. Believe me, it's worth the initial frustration.

### Desktop publishing

Desktop publishing refers to producing high-quality documents on your PC—the ones that generate remarks like "this is very attractive, and easy to read!" Effective packaging of your writing helps to convey your message clearly. Your clients will love the results. The cost of desktop publishing is low because you can now do it with your regular word processing package. So, learning it is a good investment of your time.

Technically speaking, desktop publishing is at your fingertips in a host of features that every high-level word processor contains, such as fancy characters, text in boxes, headers, footers, templates, clip art, and others. There is also an aesthetic side to DTP. Simply adding different fonts to your document does not make it easier to read. But an uncluttered, creative layout with sufficient white space will improve the quality of your document. Other documents are one of the best sources of ideas for designing yours. When you see a document you like, save it for future reference.

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