

The Write Way To Write

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

(Gene Fowler)

Some people love to write and are good at it. If you are one of them—and if your organization is full of them—you can ignore the text on this page, grab a pen, and compose brilliant sentences in the margins.

If you belong to the other 99 percent of us, read on.

Do some employees in your company have permanent writer's block? The first article below contains some good advice on ways to help reluctant writers find the confidence they need to improve their writing skills. The author's "color-keyed" approach to the writing process may be useful for your own writing, as well—even if you're not among the chronically reluctant.

After you've learned how to get over writer's block, let's look at a specific writing project: your next training proposal. This month's second "Training 101" article is a step-by-step guide to writing proposals that get approved. It describes some characteristics of successful proposals and provides a detailed list of what to include.

The Cure for Writing Anxiety

By James L. Evers, *president of James L. Evers Associates, 10 Rockland Avenue, Nanuet, NY 10954. He is the author of Hate To Write But Have To? A Self-Instruction Training Manual in Effective Business Writing, published by Evers Associates.*

Almost 60 million people have to write on the job; by some estimates, more than 60 percent of them are reluctant to do so.

Of course, everyone who has to write has occasional attacks of writing anxiety, but for reluctant writers, the anxiety accompanies most writing tasks.

Such anxiety exhibits itself in certain ways.

The writer may stare for long periods of time at a blank screen or page, worrying about the final product rather than knowing how to get started.

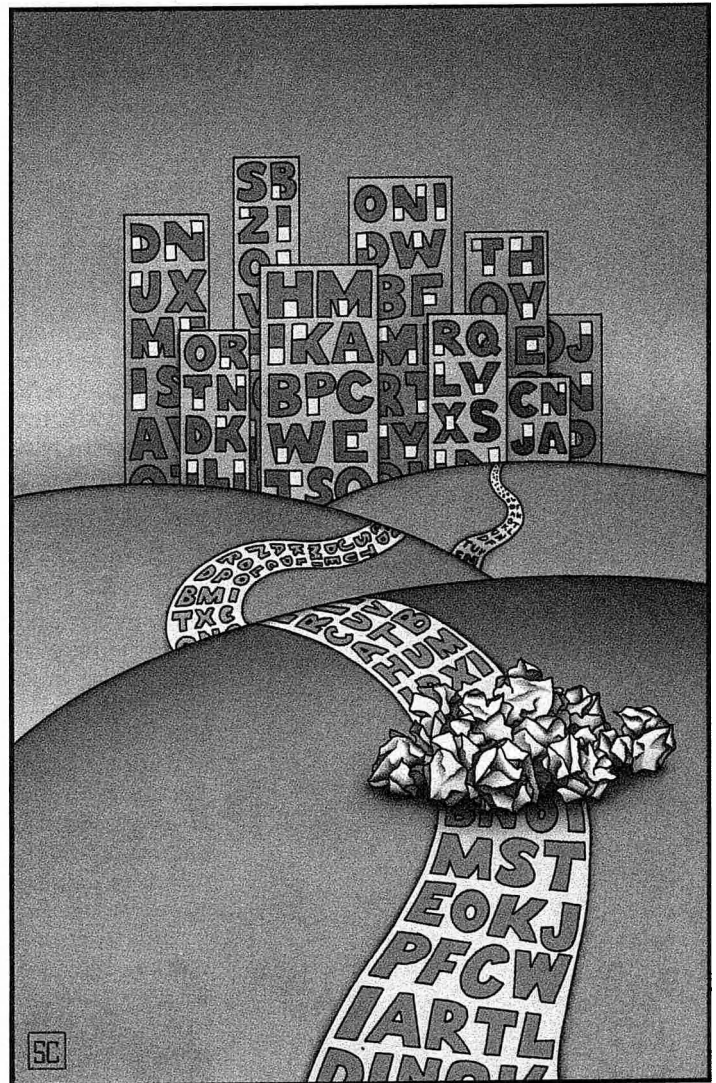
Various internal messages may come into play. The writer may express apprehension ("I don't think I can do this.") or complaints ("Why do I have to do this?"). He or she may worry about evaluation ("My boss always thinks my writing is stupid.") or may procrastinate ("I can't start this now because I've got too much other work.")

Writer's block

According to researchers, writing reluctance comes in different levels, ranging from low-level anxiety to high-level writing blocks. In *Writers Block* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), Mike Rose identifies six cognitive reasons why some writers get blocks:

- inappropriate and overly rigid composition rules
- misleading assumptions about composing
- editing too early in the process
- lack of process strategies, or inflexibility in using process strategies
- conflicting rules and assumptions
- inappropriate or inaccurate evaluation criteria.

Significantly, Rose's work is empirically based. Using what he called "stimulated recall," he gave writers a writing task and asked them to verbalize what was going



Sharon Cohen

**Do some employees
in your company
have permanent
writer's block?**

Plain and Simple

To say it simply, use ordinary words. Avoid big words, fancy phrases, wordy expressions, clichés, and jargon. The following list can help train your plain English skills. Italicized phrases are commonly used in business writing, but are not plain English expressions. The words that follow them are better, simpler terms.

Instead of This → Use This

affords the opportunity → allows
of → allows
appreciable → many
at this point in time → now
attached herewith → here's
 (yes, use contractions)
bite the bullet → (omit)
consequently → so
continue on → continue
few and far between →
 (omit)
finalize → complete
for a period of → for
future plans → plans
give consideration to → consider
in accordance with → by,
 following
in regard to → about
in the event that → if
incumbent upon → must
it is my understanding that →
 I understand that
*light at the end of a
 tunnel* → (omit)
nevertheless → still
notwithstanding → in spite of
over a barrel → (omit)
past experience → experience
prioritize → rank
pursuant to → following, by,
 under
terminate → end
transmit → send
until such time as → until

The list is adapted from the brochure, The Economy of Plain English. For a free copy, send a stamped, addressed business envelope to James L. Evers Associates (address on page 27).

through their minds as they worked through the task. From that work, he collected those six reasons for writer's block.

Other researchers have attributed writing reluctance to fear of exposure, excessive internal criticism, myths about writing, and teachers who emphasized grammar too much and too negatively rather than stressing the substance of papers.

As students, many reluctant writers avoided taking classes that required writing. As a result, they tend to lack writing experience. But reluctant writers are not necessarily poor writers; they may be good writers who have misconceptions about writing.

The realities of writing

Most reluctant writers want help in gaining the confidence that comes with competence. Trainers may need the help of managers and supervisors in identifying such people. Performance appraisals may also yield useful clues.

You may want to survey all the writers in your organization. Rose's book provides ideas on what to ask; he includes a questionnaire that asks people how they feel about their writing.

All reluctant writers, trainers of writing, and appraisers of those who write need to know these six realities of writing:

- Perfect writing doesn't exist; effective writing does.
- At least two distinct mental activities take place when a person writes—generating ideas and generating structures.
- At least two distinct frames of mind, often conflicting, exist when a person writes—the creative and the critical.
- The creative mind should direct the planning and drafting phases. The critical mind should direct the editing phases. However, a cautious mind—creating and critical—should direct the revising phase.
- A flexible (not rigid) process approach to writing is best. Each phase in the process overlaps others; phases are not hierarchical.
- Professional writers have editors correct their work; non-profes-

sional writers should have some help, too.

Learning styles

Trainers who work with reluctant writers must remember that people do not all learn and process information in the same way.

As with any other learning process, the learning of writing varies from learner to learner. That means that a flexible approach is needed. Don't teach reluctant writers rigid rules or systems for writing; instead, show them various strategies that will help them understand writing as a process.

One final note about assessing needs: a trainer who suspects that a writer's problem stems from dyslexia may want to review the work of Ron Davis at the Reading Research Council, Burlingame, California. Davis is a successful businessperson and a self-corrected dyslexic who has been the subject of intense professional research since 1982. Some researchers think he has developed a breakthrough for controlling dyslexia.

Red light, green light

One process that works effectively for teaching writing to reluctant writers is what I call the Three-Color Process. In it, writers are shown that their writing tasks can be done in three overlapping and recurring phases, each keyed with a specific color. I use the colors of a traffic light:

- green for the creative phase (planning and drafting)
- yellow for the clarifying phase (drafting and revising)
- red for the correcting phase (revising and editing).

Reluctant writers turn on the red light as soon as they know of a writing assignment, even during the thinking, or rehearsal, stages.

The color scheme encourages the reluctant writer to turn off the red light of the critical mind until the last phase. During the first phase, the green light of the creative mind should be turned on. The middle phase calls for the yellow light of the cautious mind.

Most reluctant writers who use the system feel a welcome sense of

are rejected. Some proposal developers believe they are doing well if they win acceptance for one of every 10 proposals they write. Successful proposal writers are risk takers.

Various qualities separate successful proposals from unsuccessful ones. Of course, success sometimes depends on such factors as luck, politics, timing, and reputation, but most proposals that are accepted are made up of excellent content that is clearly presented. Most successful proposals have the following qualities:

- The purpose of the proposal is clearly stated.
- The problem or need is clearly understood and defined.
- The solution is innovative and convincingly presented.
- The benefits outweigh the costs.
- The people who will implement the solution are qualified.
- The solution can be achieved on a timely basis.
- The proposal is honest, factual,

realistic, and objective.

■ The presentation is professional and attractive.

Proposals should be powerful persuasive messages. Readers will consider the benefits to them; to their departments, companies, communities, or other groups; and to society. A proposal should get the readers' attention, show clearly the benefits of accepting the proposal, give proof of the benefits, and motivate favorable action.

In addition, many recommendations for written proposals can also be adapted for proposals that are presented orally.

What to include

In solicited proposals, the elements will be specified in the request for proposal, or RFP. When you write a solicited proposal, be sure to respond fully and carefully to all of the elements specified in the RFP. You may find that certain elements seem necessary to the acceptance of your proposal but are not men-

tioned in the RFP. In such cases, try to work those parts into the specified format.

For an unsolicited proposal, you must decide what information to include. For elaborate, detailed proposals, you may need to include all 18 of the elements that are listed in the box and described in detail below. For shorter proposals, select the elements that you think are essential for the success of your proposal.

In general, the key elements are the purpose, problem or need, benefits of the proposal, description of the proposed solution, qualifications of the people who will be involved, time schedule, and cost.

The 18 elements

The following paragraphs describe all 18 common proposal elements. The order in which you present the elements may vary, depending on the situation.

The cover letter or memo, also

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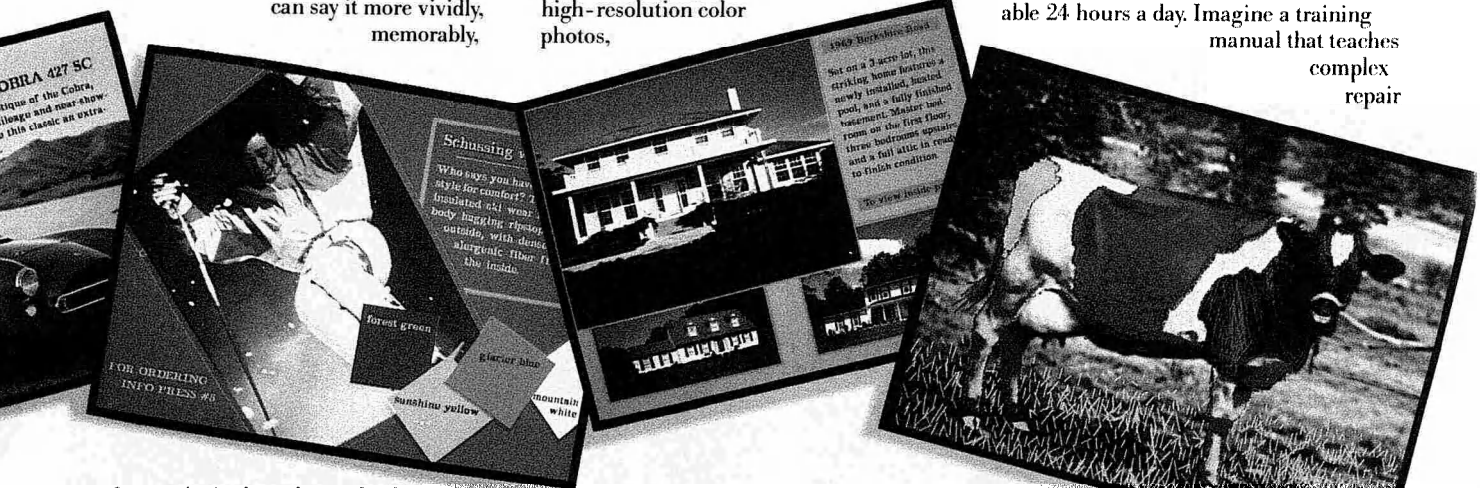
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cedures with computer graphics, text, high-fidelity sound, even a pop quiz or two.

referred to as the transmittal message, introduces the proposal to the reader. It provides coherence, reviews the highlights of the proposal, and encourages action.

The title page or cover can include the following information: the title of the proposal, the names and locations of the sender and receiver, the date of submission, the principal investigator, and the proposed cost and duration of the project.

The title should answer whichever are appropriate of the "5W and 1H" questions (Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?). It should grab the reader's attention. Since it will be used to identify the proposal, it should also be easy to remember.

Reference to authorization. If the proposal is in response to a request, you should note the request. Acknowledge informal requests in the cover letter or memo. Refer to a formal RFP on a separate sheet after the title page or cover.

In other words, your reference to the authorization could be as simple as a line in the cover letter that says, "This proposal is in response to your telephone call of August 30, 1990." Or, it could be as complex as a multiple-page abstract of a lengthy RFP.

The table of contents should list the titles and page numbers of all of the major sections of the proposal. It will help orient readers to the proposal and will help them to locate specific information quickly.

A list of illustrations, with titles and page numbers of any tables, figures, graphs, or other visual elements, should be placed immediately after the table of contents.

The proposal summary is the proposal in miniature form; it must be written after the proposal is complete. It contains, in capsule form, the most vital information from each major section of the proposal. The summary is designed to give a busy person a quick over-

view of the proposal. Keep it short. If your proposal is short, the summary may be a single paragraph. For a proposal of 100 to 500 pages, the summary could be as many as 10 pages long.

The proposal's purpose helps the reader understand why you are making a proposal and how the proposal will accomplish that purpose. Example purpose statements:

- "The purpose of this proposal is to increase sales by implementing a new product-knowledge training program for salespeople."
- "The purpose of this proposal is to reduce training costs and increase transfer of learning by using simulators instead of classroom instruction for the training of machine operators."

The purpose statement may stand alone or may be followed by a brief explanation, depending on the reader's knowledge and need for information.

The problem or need. In this section, describe the problem being

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solved or the need being met by your proposal. Be sure to relate the problem or need to the purpose you've just described.

Background data on the problem should be included if they are necessary for the reader's complete understanding. Explain how the problem developed, its magnitude, and the consequences if nothing is done. You may want to combine such data with the section on the problem or need.

The benefits of the proposal represent the outcomes from the completion of your proposed solution. The benefits must clearly serve the interests of the reader and the organization. Of course, the benefits must also outweigh the costs. If your proposal is competing with other proposals, the benefits you cite must be more cost-effective than those in your competitors' proposals. (Cost data will be given later in the proposal.)

The description of the proposed solution is the most important sec-

tion in the proposal. It will probably be the largest section. It contains your solution to the problem or your recommendation for meeting the need.

This section must tie in with the information given in earlier parts of the proposal. You must refer in this section to the proposal's purpose, the problem or need, and the benefits of the proposal. Your reader must understand your solution clearly and be convinced that it achieves the purpose, solves the problem, and provides the promised benefits.

In this section, you must include specifically what you propose to have done, who will do it, when it will be done, where it is to be done, how it will be done, and why it should be done. If you are responding to an RFP, be careful to provide the information called for in each item of the RFP's description section.

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MANATECH

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Eighteen Elements of a Proposal

A comprehensive list of common elements of successful proposals would include the following items. (They are described in detail in the text.)

- Cover letter or memo
- Title page or cover
- Reference to authorization
- Table of contents
- List of illustrations
- Proposal summary or abstract
- Purpose
- Problem or need
- Background
- Benefits of the proposal
- Description of the proposed solution
- Evaluation plan
- Qualifications of personnel
- Time schedule
- Cost
- Glossary
- Appendices
- Bibliography

and the strength of your solution's rationale. Show how those features of your proposal fit your reader's needs. A good way to do that is to relate your solutions directly to each of the benefits given earlier.

The intent is to show clearly that you have thought through all aspects of the proposed solution and that it is a realistic, feasible, and desirable way of solving the problem or meeting the need.

An evaluation plan may be an appropriate addition to your proposal. The evaluation plan describes a way to judge the degree of success achieved by the proposal's implementation. It could include a record-keeping system; a review panel of experts; statistical analysis procedures; a reporting system; or various control, analysis, measurement, and judgment techniques.

The qualifications of personnel section provides biographical information on key participants involved in implementing the proposal. In this section, you must convince your reader that these people are fully qualified to serve in their assigned roles. The information for each person should include education, experience, accomplishments, successes, and achievements that directly relate to his or her involvement in the proposed solution.

The time schedule shows when activity is to start and when it is to be completed. For simple proposals, the time schedule may consist of a list of activities with begin and end dates. For elaborate proposals, you may need to use such complex task/time analysis charts as Gantt, PERT (Program Evaluation Review Technique), or Milestone. Your responsibility is to create a clear, realistic time schedule.

The cost of the proposed solution is shown next. The section may be labeled "Cost," "Prices," "Budget," or another appropriate title. The costs must be reasonable in relation to the benefits and products or services to be provided. If you are responding to an RFP, the request will probably specify a format to use for the cost section; follow such guidelines.

The glossary is an alphabetical list of terms used in the proposal,

with definitions. Carefully analyze your audience. If readers may be unfamiliar with many of the terms used in your proposal, consider including a glossary. If you have used only a few unfamiliar terms, define each one the first time you use it.

Appendices are useful for keeping the body of the proposal as short and readable as possible. They should include complex supporting information that is essential to the reader's understanding and decision making.

A bibliography may strengthen your case by showing that you are familiar with important references. If you think it will add credibility, or if you have footnoted material in the proposal, include a bibliography.

Tying it all together

Most short proposals can be written by one person. Long, complex proposals may benefit from a proposal writing team, with different sections of the proposal assigned to

different people. In such cases, it is important to have one chief writer to ensure consistency and to tie all the parts together.

Successful organizations depend on the creation of new ideas that will improve productivity and profitability. Customers and suppliers want to receive ideas that will benefit them and you. Proposals are ways to convey new ideas to those decision makers.

Some proposals will be accepted, but many will be rejected. Don't be deterred by rejections. Keep developing and submitting proposals. Successful proposal writers do, and they realize professional and personal gains when their proposals are accepted.

"Training 101" is edited by **Catherine M. Petrini**. Send your short articles for consideration to *Training 101*, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.

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