

IN THIS ARTICLE

Writing Skills

Are You the Write Type?

People are different. Now there's a revelation! As a trainer or training manager—whether you work with engineers, doctors, lawyers, salespeople, or social workers—you recognize as a fundamental truth that people are different. And you no doubt consider the personality differences among trainees when designing and delivering your training programs. ☞ The same should be true for helping employees improve their writing skills. Unfortunately, most people have been taught to write in the same way, despite their differences. And to make matters worse, one manager might praise the same piece of business writing that another manager pummels.

THERE ARE FICTION WRITERS AND

NONFICTION WRITERS. THERE ARE

ALSO THINKING WRITERS AND

FEELING WRITERS. HERE'S A WAY

TO USE THE MYERS-BRIGGS TYPE

INDICATOR TO HELP ALL THE

WRITERS IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

DO THEIR BEST WORK.

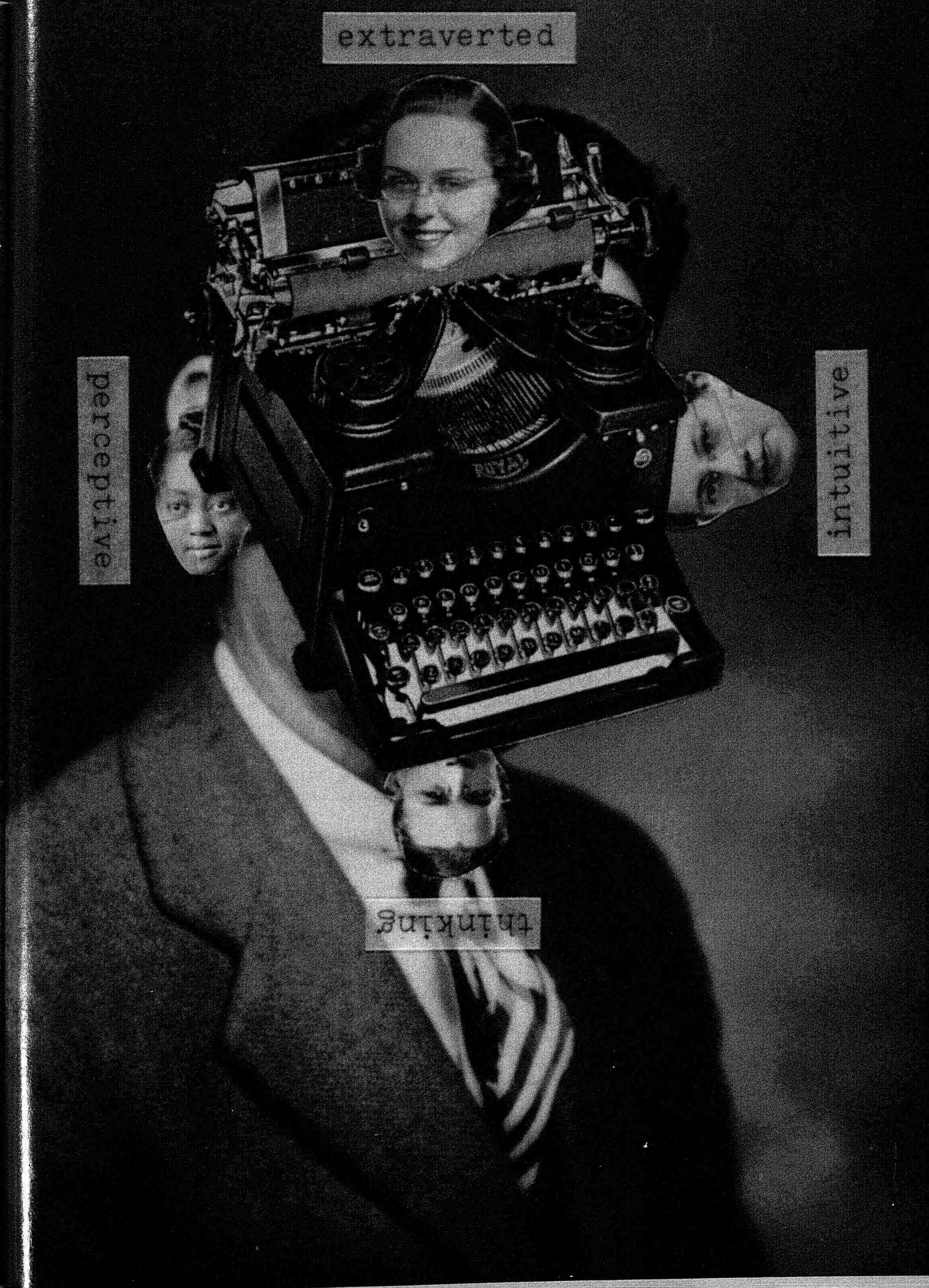
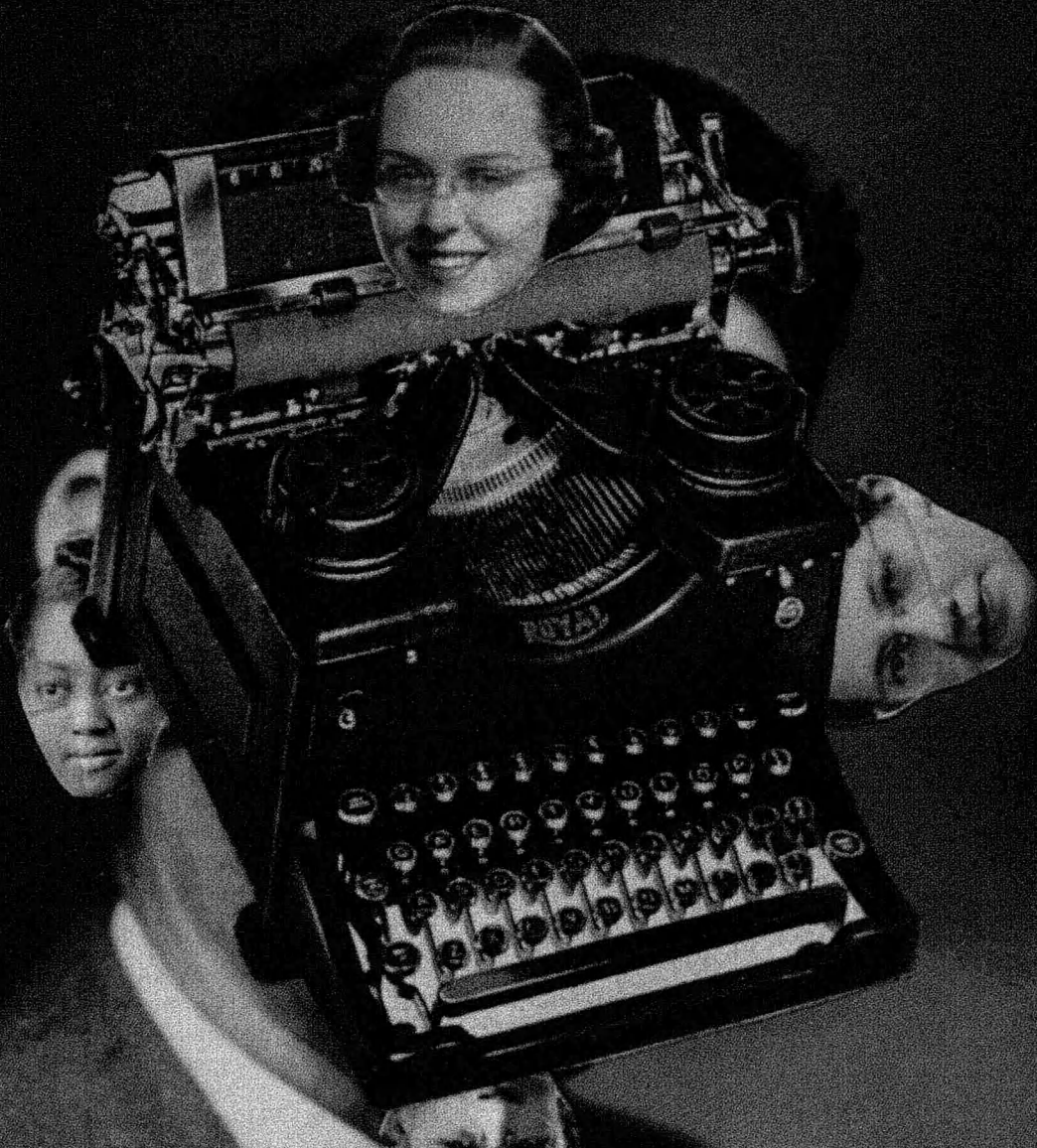
BY STEPHEN D. GLADIS

extraverted

intuitive

perceptive

thinking



Personality types and writing styles

How can you identify the various personality types of the writers you work with? And how can you use that knowledge to help them produce their best writing?

One way people's personality differences have been defined is in the research done by Isabel Briggs Myers and Katharine C. Briggs, who created the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The MBTI can be applied to many human endeavors, including writing.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator sets up four scales along which a person's preferences are plotted to determine an overall personality type. Two of those scales—Intuitive/Sensing and Thinking/Feeling—describe cognitive functions. Writing is mainly cognitive, so only those two scales are used.

Four combinations of cognitive functions are possible:

- ▶ Intuitive and Thinking (NT)
- ▶ Intuitive and Feeling (NF)
- ▶ Sensing and Thinking (ST)
- ▶ Sensing and Feeling (SF)

Understanding those four types can give trainers a head start on improving the written products being produced by their organizations.

Each cognitive type corresponds to a different type of writer. Keep in mind that the two scales are continuums. The degree to which people fit the descriptions will depend on the strength of their personality preferences in each area measured by indicators such as the MBTI.

The four types of writers are as follows:

- ▶ Correspondents (SFs on the MBTI) are strong feelers who are sensitive to people; they tend to write to their friends frequently.
- ▶ Technical writers are STs. They are detail-oriented and prefer scientific, logical, technically precise writing.
- ▶ Creative writers are the creative, intuitive writers who are most likely to write stories, novels, or more imaginative pieces. They are NFs.
- ▶ Analytical writers are the intellectual thinkers—those who prefer the world of theory and logic. They are NTs.

Correspondents and technical writers take in information the same way, but they process it differently. They're Sensing in the incoming

mode; in other words, they receive information through the five senses: seeing, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. But the two types diverge in the outgoing mode. Correspondents filter information through their feelings; technical writers think about things logically.

Similarly, creative and analytical writers both get their information the same way, through intuition. But they treat that information differently. Creative writers take a more feeling approach; analytical writers take an intellectual approach.

Each of the following profiles is an ideal depiction; in the real world, you'll find plenty of exceptions and variations. Understanding the profiles can help you assist and direct the writers in your organization in improving the materials they produce.

Four profiles

To illustrate the model, let's say we know four people who fit the writer profiles: Donna the correspondent, Mary the technical writer, John the creative writer, and Jess the analytical writer.

Correspondents. Like all correspondents, Donna wants to collect accurate, factual information. She likes to amass data and document them accurately. But when Donna's ready to write, she considers how people might feel when they read her work. Her concern about her writing's effect on an audience makes her a "pleaser." She chooses her words, examples, and arguments to create a favorable impression and to avoid anything that might offend readers.

The greatest strengths of correspondents are that they are factual and audience-centered. One weakness is that they lack a conceptual approach, which leads to problems in drawing conclusions and organizing data in meaningful ways. Also, they ignore logic. If a correspondent thinks that the logic of a situation is too harsh for an audience to accept, the correspondent tends to drop it in favor of a more palatable, people-pleasing argument.

Because correspondents apply a personal touch to their writing, they can be viewed as mushy and soft-hearted. Some readers may consider them weak and overly emotional.

If you train or manage correspondents like Donna, ask them to write the more personal pieces required by your organization—such as condolence notes and responses to customer complaints. It isn't wise to assign them to write adversarial letters or documents that spell out corrective personnel actions. They may not have the mettle to say "no" and make tough decisions.

Technical writers. Mary the technical writer is a rule maker and rule keeper. Her main focus is accuracy, accuracy, accuracy. Her concern with facts, logic, and precision makes her a good copy editor and a stickler for good grammar.

As an editor, Mary calls 'em as she sees 'em. She has no trouble pointing out someone's mistakes. Mary's writing conforms to traditional rules, and she likes traditional writing models. Give her a format, and she'll stick to it. She'll make sure everyone else sticks to it, too.

For example, if you want all company memos to start with the main point, tell your technical writers. They will follow such rules to the letter and will appreciate the fact that you told them what you want.

The main strength of technical writers is that their data are usually correct and accurate. They enjoy working with facts and numbers. They can marshal information, remember it, and express it accurately and concisely. Technical writers are logical, and their arguments are rigorous. They draw accurate conclusions based on solid evidence. They make few leaps of faith.

Their weaknesses include some trouble in dealing with concepts. Often obsessed with factual accuracy, technical writers experience difficulty in developing themes and grouping concepts together. Their writing contains a lot of factual data. Often, it leaves readers asking, "So, what does it all mean?"

Technical writers can be viewed as insensitive. They often polarize people because their writing takes a rigid stand on issues. Their this-is-how-it-is tone can offend. People may view their writing as cold, callous, and uncaring. Consequently, readers may automatically reject the messages presented by technical writers.

Technical writers such as Mary should be appointed the stewards of your organization's rules and regulations. Give them policies, rules, and regulations to write, and they'll thrive. Personal writing isn't their forte. Though they may view such writing as acceptable, they generally think it's mushy and unnecessary. When technical writers produce personal communications, their writing can come across as artificial and insincere.

When reviewing the writing of technical writers, check for concepts. Have they pulled the facts together in a way that makes it easy for readers to grasp the major points? Or have they just assembled a succession of facts and figures? Make sure the writing doesn't read like a military command, unless that's the tone you want.

Creative writers. John the creative writer seeks to write about new and different things. He's concerned with the possibilities and with audience awareness and acceptance. He understands audiences superbly and is adaptable, though he sometimes appears overly sensitive when placed

in a decision-making role.

As a writer, John can produce interesting copy as quickly as any personality type can. His writing is rooted in the conceptual, but his approach is innovative, whenever and wherever possible.

The main strengths of creative writers are that they like the challenge of new projects and new pieces of writing. They don't flinch at nontraditional approaches. And they want to inspire and motivate others.

Creative writers are audience-based. They know what people need, and they try to provide it. Creative writers are persuasive; they're great salespeople.

One weakness of creative writers is a tendency to sacrifice accuracy in favor of style enhancement or audience appeal. Always check the research, data, and facts collected by creative writers. They mean well, but they aren't always exact. Concepts turn them on; the nitty-gritty does not. To creative writers, details are necessary evils.

Creative writers employ a logic

based on values, not facts. Their concern for their audience, which is one of their strengths, can turn into a weakness if that concern overpowers logic.

Creative writers such as John perform well as idea generators, inspirers, and cheerleaders. They make great writers, as long as they're continually challenged by new problems. It's important to vary their assignments, even if that means requiring them to write materials for work areas other than their own. If you feed the fertile imaginations of creative writers, you'll keep them producing for you for a long time.

It's best not to ask creative writers to perform repetitious assignments or to write rules and regulations. Such writing would bore them silly. Remember, their writing is infused with their personal emotions. While they're writing, support them and tell them you appreciate their work. Assure them of the value of their writing assignments to others in the organization.

Analytical writers. Jess the analytical writer is the most dominant and forceful of the writer personalities. She is creative, like John, but her writing tends to be objective, even insensitive at times.

Confident of what she knows logically, Jess's writing expresses a self-assured tone. She has the facility for idea-based logic, and she develops a lot of possibilities in her writing. Many people like Jess end up as leaders in business, industry, or the military. Analytical writers also tend to be scientists or college professors. They aren't afraid to express themselves, and they write frequently.

One of the major strengths of analytical writers is their intuition. They see many possibilities in a single piece of writing. They are uncannily perceptive and are able to make inferences from mere shreds of information.

Analytical writers are clear thinkers. They're good at problem solving and decision making. Their guiding lights are analysis and logic. Analytical writers are architects of plans and policies. They're adept at pointing out abstract consequences and at seeing the big picture.

Analytical writers' weaknesses lie in the factual area. They make errors in compiling data. Facts are valuable to

Same Memo; Different Writing Types

Here are four versions of a memo for supervisors on family leave for fathers, as it might be written by employees whose writing types fall into the four different categories. The abbreviation after each writing type is from the related Myers-Briggs cognitive scale.

Correspondent (SF). "Last year, there were 17 cases in our organization in which men could have taken family leave to be with their newborn babies but did not. In an attempt to provide a humane policy, I suggest canvassing all employees for their suggestions on changing the policy. Your help in providing accurate, dependable information would be appreciated. Remember, we must work together to solve the problem. People are our main concern."

Technical writer (ST). "During fiscal year 1992, 17 men who were eligible for family leave because of a birth did not take it. Have all full-time employees immediately fill out the following questionnaire

for suggestions about whether the policy should be changed, and report the data to this office by August 1."

Creative writer (NF). "The birth of a new child is a special time in a family's life. But many fathers in our organization aren't taking advantage of our family-leave policy. We believe that strong families are important to our company, so please come to a meeting on Thursday prepared to discuss your ideas and feelings about this important subject."

Analytical writer (NT). "Many fathers haven't taken advantage of our family-leave policy. I assume this is because they've worked out logical arrangements with their spouses to cover their bases. I imagine many fathers are concerned that taking family leave might hurt their careers and competitive status in the organization. Therefore, they opt not to take it. Let me know if my assumptions aren't correct."

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analytical writers only as they support a particular thesis or position. Analytical writers expect people to read between the lines. When reviewing their work, don't be misled by the forceful tone of the writing. Check the data, facts, and documentation closely.

Analytical writers may appear to be insensitive because they prize logic rather than the feelings or needs of an audience. Analytical writers present arguments based on personal perspectives—they call it as they see it. In print, they may come across as domineering.

Analytical writing appeals to all types of readers because it is both intuitive and analytical. But writers like Jess need to become more sensitive to their audience. It's best to give analytical writers assignments that require problem solving. But be careful when they start slinging data around. And don't be snowed by the persuasive force of their writing. Ask to see facts and documentation.

A place to start

The classification of writers into four basic types—correspondents, technical writers, creative writers, and analytical writers—provides a convenient model that can help any trainer or manager improve business writing in an organization. The construction may also be used as a guide for choosing employees for various writing assignments.

Not every writer you'll encounter will neatly fit the four profiles. But the profiles provide a place to start in working with writers and in helping them improve their writing. ■

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