

How to Develop Anything in Writing

By Stephen C. Rafe

Try this simple, proven way to get words to work for you.

Writing is an integral part of leading an organization. Yet it's usually given short shrift in leadership education and training. If you're lucky, you may find a mentor to help you learn the ins and outs of writing well. In the meantime, try this quick and easy process for writing reports (or just about anything else). Even the most experienced communicator will benefit from this fresh look at making words work.

1. WRITE IT DOWN

Decide on the broad topic you want to cover.

Consider the many aspects of that topic that you *might* cover. Then select one.

Choose three points you want others to learn. Write down those points.

2. ORGANIZE IT

Put each of your key points on a separate sheet of paper (or page in your computer). Decide what your readers need to know about each point: Jot down thoughts, ideas, or fragments on the appropriate page. Include any new terms, concepts, definitions, and the like.

Group "like" things together. Organize your random musings into clusters of words that relate to each other. That will simplify your task, and your reader's.

Arrange the flow of your word clusters into a logical sequence.

Link your sequenced chunks together. So far you have mostly nouns. Now you'll add verbs, modifiers, linking words, and so on.

3. KEEP BASIC RULES IN MIND

As you write, think of your audience. Know what they know, and you'll be able to give them what they need. Keep the writing at an appropriate level – not too fundamental, but not too complex. Find the appropriate middle ground between "See Spot run," and "Through careful observation it can be seen that Spot is in a rapid-paced ambulatory modality."

The first time you use a new term, spell it out rather than using initials, acronyms, or jargon. Put the term's "nickname" right next to it in parentheses. For example: "The Leadership Task Force (LTF)

suggests that" Otherwise, you're likely to confuse your readers and lay the groundwork for their failure.

Write in active rather than passive voice. It makes learning a lot easier when the reader understands who is supposed to be doing what. A recent instruction on a medicine container, written for caregivers, read: "The correct dosage can be delivered by mouth." Somehow this brings to mind nurses carrying pills between their lips, like puppies carrying a pair of slippers. The instructions to the caregiver make more sense as, "Put the correct dosage in the patient's mouth."

Review your draft to ensure that you've covered the key points to your satisfaction. Provide definitions, examples, visuals such as charts and graphs, and other essential details that will contribute to understanding.

Put the draft away for a few days. Then take it out and reread it. This new perspective will highlight things that might still be unclear or need rewording.

Ask others to read the draft and tell you if they understand the main ideas covered. Is it clear, organized, simple, and understandable? If not, keep rewriting and editing it until it fulfills these criteria. 

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The Write Way

Use articles such as these (www.NonprofitWorld.org/members) to sharpen your leadership and communication skills:

How Jargon Undermines Communication (Vol. 27, No. 2)

Writing Well By Doing LESS: A Five-Step Plan (Vol. 30, No. 5)

The Nonprofit Executive as Chief Learning Officer (Vol. 16, No. 2)