Writing Skills

⇨ Fundamental concepts and skills of good writing

⇨ What you need to think before starting to write (audiences, messages, research)

⇨ How to organise your information systematically

⇨ Language and content you should be using while writing about your project (style & tone, jargon, evidence, numbers, etc.)

⇨ Why and how to use the quotes

This factsheet runs through the fundamental concepts and skills that good journalists use to write powerful and effective prose. Many of these ideas are universal and can be applied to all kinds of writing, from press releases and case studies to project internal correspondence.

Planning and preparing

Audience

There is no such thing as simply good writing. Writing is only good if it gets the right message across to a specific audience. An article full of scientific detail and jargon might be perfect for an academic journal, but useless for a community magazine. Therefore, a writer's first step must be to identify the intended readership. Audience analysis determines the tone, style, pitch, angle and content of every article. It determines what knowledge can be assumed and what needs to be explained. It determines what news angles will work. Write what your audience wants to read, in a way that will interest and appeal to them. A good writer always keeps that audience at the front of his or her mind from the very start.

Messages

What key information do you want to communicate? Narrow it down to two or three basic messages that will form your theme. Build the article around these messages using evidence, quotes and colour. Messages can be explicit (clearly stated as information) or implicit (intended for subliminal or emotional impact). For instance, an article about MED Programme project may contain explicit messages about the scheme itself, and the implicit message that pan-European cooperation is valuable and positive. Messages sit alongside audiences at the heart of the writing process.

Research

Good writing requires thorough research and knowledge of the subject matter, which should be clear to the reader through those same three building blocks: evidence, quotes and colour. Gather and organise these materials before starting to write. Be sure to have evidence to back up all of your main statement, in the form of recent statistics or official information, and cite sources to give credibility to your arguments. Check your facts.

Organisation

After determining your audiences, your messages and a strong news angle to tie them all together, it can help to organise your information systematically. Well-written prose alternates between statement and quote, between numbers and colour. It gradually unfolds, with copy flowing logically between elements, so that the end of each sentence announces the beginning of the next.

⇨ *Consider what facts need to be introduced first to put quotes and other information in context. Generally speaking, rank and order your ideas in descending importance. This approach emulates the classic "inverted pyramid" journalistic story model, so-called because it is top-heavy with all the important information at the start. A good press release reads somewhat like a news story: this helps the journalist to see it as news.*

Writing

The headline

The headline is right at the top of the inverted pyramid, so in many ways it is the most important part. The headline is your chance to sell your story. It is the first thing your reader sees. If it's bad, it's also the last thing they see. A perfect headline will encapsulate all of the messages and key facts and also capture readers' attention. In the real world, we sometimes have to compromise, but always should aim to achieve as much of that as possible.

The headline should be no more than 10 words and should contain an active verb.

Write the headline first: the process of getting it right is an exercise in organising ideas and distilling the essence of the story, which often makes the rest of the piece much easier to write. Don't write it last as an afterthought. Stick to one main point – don't try to fit too much in. Keep it short and snappy. Use strong vocabulary to make every word count. Play with words, substitute and replace until you get it just right.

The lead paragraph

The lead paragraph is particularly important for "newsy" writing such as statements and press releases. For longer articles like features and extended case studies, the same principles apply but can be spread over two or three paragraphs.

The lead paragraph must tell the reader what is essential about the story: what is new and why it matters. Don't encumber the reader with unnecessary detail to start with – give the broad picture first and bring in supporting information later. Agonise over the lead paragraph: if you get it perfect, the rest of the piece can seem almost to write itself because everything important flows from the lead.

Clearly we can't fit everything into the first paragraph, so how do we choose what information is really important? Following are a few useful tricks.

The 6 Ws

Have you answered all of the question words? Usually most of them are important. Check if your first paragraph tells the reader:

⇨ **W**hat has happened
⇨ **W**ho is involved
⇨ **W**here it happened

⇨ **W**hen it happened
⇨ **W**hy it happened
⇨ Ho**w** it happened

So what?

…is the most important question of all. Read back what you have written and ask yourself "so what". If you have to come up with extra information to answer the "so what" question rewrite to answer the question in the first place. When you have written a paragraph that could not possibly leave anyone asking "so what?" only then you have got it right.

"The fourth why"

…is a variation on the "6 Ws" and "so what" techniques that helps you to dig deep into the context that surrounds your subject matter.
⇨ Something has happened that you're going to write about.
⇨ Ask why it happened.
⇨ Then ask why the thing that explained the first "why" happened.
⇨ Then ask why the thing that explained that happened.
⇨ By the time you get to the third or fourth "why" you've got to the heart of it.

Ten key words

Make a list of 10 words without which you simply cannot write the piece. They do not have to be the exact words you will use – think more of the facts or concepts that must be there. Once you have that list of 10 keywords (not including articles or prepositions), you have the essence of the story. Now rank those words in order of importance, then turn that list into a sentence. Often this will be something approaching a decent lead paragraph. In general, start your sentence with the subject of your story, unless you have good reason not to.

How long before you reach a crucial word?

This is a variation on the ten-key-words approach. Read your introduction and count the number of words you use before you reach the most essential word. If you get near the end of the sentence before reaching that "must have" word, then stop and rewrite. You should be hitting key words very quickly.

Active or passive voice?

In general, it is better to write a lead paragraph in the active voice, but balance this with the need to start a piece with its subject.

Lead paragraph length

25-30 words are usually ample to covey the key information and context. Sentences longer than 30 words start to lose focus and impact and digress into unnecessary detail.

Soft leads

Not all lead paragraphs are hard and factual. Features often start with a "teaser" – an anecdote, a description, a narrative, a question. So do "soft news" stories. This technique is also called a "delayed" lead. A soft lead should not change the

structure of the top third of a story. It should be followed by the same recipe: essence, detail, quote, context.

Structure

Build blocks

Try to group all of the information relating to one element of your piece in one block of paragraphs. Do not talk about the same thing in completely different sections, except in a thematic way. Put the most important block of information first. This should be the longest block, and should form the middle section of your piece.

The second, third and fourth blocks should contain progressively less important information, arranged as an inverted pyramid. The last block should contain the least important angle, and it should be possible to cut it out without harming the piece overall.

Write sequentially

Within these blocks, each sentence should connect to the next like a link in a chain.

For example: you make a statement, expand on it in the next paragraph, illustrate it with a quote in the third paragraph, and give some figures or background in the fourth paragraph. Then you move on to the next "block" by using a signpost sentence.

Use signposts

Signposts warn readers that you are moving to the next theme. A signpost is a transitional word or sentence that marks the end of one block and the beginning of the next. It can be as simple as "but" or "however", or can be a short sentence which summarises and announces what is going to follow, like the last sentence of the paragraph above this one. Think of them as the cement between the blocks.

Flagging

If you are unable to avoid introducing an important idea relatively low down in your piece, at least to refer to it briefly higher up as well. This is called "flagging" – raise a flag high up in the story that something important is coming lower down that is worth reading on for. That way it is less likely to be overlooked.

The kicker

Particularly in soft news stories, features and case studies, it can be worth saving a good quote or nugget of information for last, to finish the story with a flourish and reinforce its impact. A return to a personal story or anecdote from the top of the story, an ironic afterthought, or a splash of colour can end a story with a smile and a sense of closure.

Language and content

Keep it simple

Be concise. One word is better than two. Use as few words as possible: this will concentrate your message and make space to say more. Cut out the waffle. Examine each word and ask if it is essential or redundant; if you can do without, cut it out. Use simple grammatical constructions, avoiding multiple sub-clauses, commas, semicolons (and brackets too).

Keep it short

Short sentences and short paragraphs are clearer. Two short sentences are better than one long sentence. Sentences should usually contain no more than 30 words, because any longer than that and they become hard to understand and remember since readers have to hold too much information in their short-term memory, which starts to strain the mind just as this 49-word sentence is starting to do. Paragraphs should contain no more than three sentences and one basic theme or idea.

Use strong language

Replace dull words with lively synonyms. Choose words that convey movement and dynamism, while avoiding clichés and ornate or flowery terms. Write as if you care. If you don't sound interested, your readers won't feel interested.

Use straightforward language

Write with normal words such as you use in everyday business life. You are communicating with normal human beings. Your goal is clarity, not to impress readers with clever words.

Vary your vocabulary

Avoid repeating words and phrases. This can be a challenge when writing at length on one theme; try to find synonyms and alternative formulations to avoid the jarring effect of reading the same terms over again.

Write with verbs

Weak writers sprinkle their copy copiously with flowery adjectives and adverbs. Good writing revolves around simple, strong, straightforward **verbs**. Deploy powerful verbs in active, declarative formations. The passive voice should be used sparingly. Overusing participles (verbs in forms that end in "-ing") is a mistake.

Cut out jargon

Picture the least sophisticated member of your target audience and remove or explain any technical terms that they would not understand. That includes corporate or management buzz-words as well as industry jargon. Avoid or at least spell out acronyms and abbreviations.

Write in the third person

Do not use "we" or "I" except in quotes.

Style and tone

Write in a style that is appropriate to your audience. In-house corporate communications can sometimes be chatty in tone, whereas publications for outside audiences should usually be more formal and couched in businesslike language.

Colour

"Colour" means using your senses. A well-written story gives a reader the feeling of having been in the place that you describe and of knowing the people that you quote. Often the reader will remember your story for a little detail, not the big picture. The best details are the ones that tell the big picture.

Be balanced and objective

A press release emulates the impartial tone of a news piece. It is not marketing or advertising. Don't sound overexcited or "over-sell" your message. By all means inject energy into your writing, but don't overdo it – avoid hype.

Read it out loud

Well-written copy sounds right when spoken. If it strains your voice, simplify it. If you run out of breath, shorten the sentences. Reading out loud often uncovers mistakes that are difficult to spot by eye.

Use evidence

Assertions become convincing when backed up with facts. Give context, comparisons and sources, and be precise.

"Thanks to this ETC project, local authorities have spent less than half as much on widgets recently" is not very useful or convincing for a journalist. It would be much better to say: "Thanks to this ETC project, average spending on widgets by local authorities fell by 75 percent to €200,000 in 2012 from €800,000 in 2011, according to an independent survey by ABC polling in May 2012".

Edit and rewrite

Few of us get it perfect first time. Many of the best writers return to their prose repeatedly, bringing a fresh mind to the task. Write a first draft, leave it, and come back to it. If the deadline is tight, don't panic: time pressure can actually help you to crystallise what is important and write it clearly.

Context

MED projects do not exist in a vacuum, they interact with other systems and people's lives in complex ways. Often a good news angle can be found by stepping back and looking at where a development in a project fits into the bigger picture. All stories are part of the bigger picture, and it is this link with other events that makes them relevant.

Stories are put in perspective by events that happened before or elsewhere, or because of the impact they may have on events later or elsewhere. This perspective is what we call context. Context is the reason why readers would want to read your story, it is the "so what?".

Always ask whether what you are describing is part of a bigger theme. A trend, anywhere in the world, always makes for good context.

Context is important enough that it should usually feature in the lead paragraph and also persist lower down the piece.

The most elementary form of context is rank. Superlatives such as "the world's biggest" or "the fastest-growing" provide crucial context. Milestones are as compelling as superlatives. When something happens, readers want to know if it's the first time or the second time, or how long ago it last happened, or how long since something similar happened.

Background

Context is often confused with background. Context gives meaning to the story and is essential: you cannot write a proper story without it. Background is the description or explanation of basic facts relating to the story. It is useful, but less important.

Unlike context, background does not necessarily have to appear high up in the story. Do not stick one-paragraph slabs of background in the middle of your piece. Try to weave in little bits of background as it unfolds.

Do not leave holes

Do not mention an element without explaining it. If you have just mentioned Europe's second-busiest sea-port, the reader will wonder immediately which is Europe's busiest sea-port. Tell them. A well-crafted piece guides the reader from A to Z, without ever having to pause or wonder what the writer meant.

Numbers

Numbers are the single-biggest cause of holes and errors. If you mention a number, give some context or something to compare it with. Numbers need company. On their own they often mean nothing. If a figure has changed from 446 to 903, don't expect the reader to find the meaning: do their calculations for them. Tell them it has doubled. Don't burden a piece with too many numbers: one or two in the top third should be enough to illustrate any trend. Put the rest of the figures in the bottom third of your article.

Check all numbers. Beware confusing millions and billions. Beware decimal places.

Style

Write in a style that is appropriate to your audience. Communication within a MED project can sometimes be chatty or informal in tone, whereas publications for outside audiences should usually be formal and couched in businesslike language.

Ensure that the layout and content of everything you print and distribute conforms to not only your project's but also MED Programme and EU guidelines for publication, including all relevant and applicable logos. Be consistent with linguistic style, either according to your project's own style guidelines if they exist or according to a standard newspaper style guide.

This will determine such issues as capitalisation and how to express dates and numbers. Layout guidelines should apply to text style, font and sizes, as well as presentation and capitalisation. Style consistency is a sign of professionalism and should be used not only for printed materials but also for e-mails and websites.

Accuracy

Check everything, including photograph captions. Be extra-careful with names, figures and unfamiliar or technical words. Check that days of the week coincide with dates. If you say a certain number of points follow, count them. Be sure not to infringe copyright or libel laws – if in any doubt, consult a superior before publishing.

Energy and interest

Write as if you care: if you don't sound interested, your readers won't feel interested.

Quotes

Quotations add legitimacy and emphasis to your messages. They can also inject humanity, personality, emotion, immediacy and colour – but only if they are lively and clear. Quotes are a good way to make abstract ideas seem concrete, personal and relevant to the real world. You can get away with slightly more lively, informal and opinionated language in a quote without losing a balanced tone overall.

Be sure to quote people with authority over your subject matter. These can range from project managers with a broad overview to personnel with more hands-on experience where appropriate. Quotes from third parties such as people whose lives have been touched by a project can be especially valuable

Journalists need quotes to bring their story alive. A strong quote is valuable to any project because it is the part of a press release that is most likely to be reproduced unchanged in print.

Good quotes sound like realistic spoken language. Avoid hype, slogans, corporate buzz-words. Do not just put quote marks around written prose. Written English uses longer sentences, more formal vocabulary and more complex grammar. Spoken English uses shorter sentences and simpler, brighter vocabulary including contractions. Written English is punctuated logically; spoken English is punctuated "respirationally" – to give pauses where people naturally breathe. Use words that people actually spoke, or speak your rewritten quotes to ensure they sound natural.

Talk to people as part of your research: spoken words are much more fertile ground for gathering strong quote material than written words. Encourage people to speak enthusiastically about the subject. Listen out for powerful and descriptive words and phrases that you can use in quotes.

The first quote in your story is very important. It can make the difference between a reader reading on and giving up. Try to get a quote in by the third or fourth

paragraph, if not the second. Delaying much longer than that without a quote can leave a piece of writing with a dry, academic tone.

Double-check the spelling of the name and job title of everyone you quote. Mistakes make people angry and undermine your credibility.

Don't waste quotes on purely factual information. Use quotes to give reasons, explanations or judgments and express opinions or emotions. Quotes are for illustration, decoration and emphasis, not conveying new information.

Make them personal, using phrases such as: "I believe…" or: "For me, this is…"

Most people most of the time are not very eloquent. PR professionals have the luxury of rewriting and inventing quotes that sound more effective. Check that the person being quoted is happy with the quote, whether the words are theirs or yours.

Adopt language and tone appropriate for the person being quoted.

Don't use too many quotes or quote too many different people. Spice up a story with a few good quotes, and keep them short.

Make available a photo of the person quoted, where appropriate.

"Put full sentences inside the quote marks." Broken sentence fragments in quotes are "worse than useless to" a journalist.

The six Cs

Conversational

Try to write the way you speak. Get rid of old-fashioned phrases. Why say "Due to the fact that ..." when you can write "because.."? Would you normally say "the aforementioned information"? Why not "the information" or, if you need to refer back to a point, "the previous information"? Don't say "motorized mobility" – when you would normally say "cars".

Clear

The reader should be able to understand precisely what you are saying. The language should be adapted to the reader. Use specific examples that the reader can relate to. Don't assume that your reader understands the jargon of your project area.

Concise

You should eliminate any unnecessary words. Why use four words, "in as much as," when you can use one word, "because"? This is not to say that you can't write long articles, but the longer the report or article, the more ineffective it becomes. People are unlikely to finish reading a long report – especially if it is on a website. Try to punctuate your articles with images, pictures and charts.

Complete

Make sure you have included all the relevant information the reader needs to know. The biggest problem with leaving out information is that the reader has to make assumptions. Use dates, figures, data to ensure your text is based on the facts.

Constructive

In modern writing, use words or phrases that set a positive tone. Constructive words are like smiling when you greet someone. They leave a good impression. Words such as "failure", and "error" tend to distance the reader from the writer and gives a negative impression of the project. Words such as "Agreeable", "Proud" and Success" help create a positive tone.

Correct

The last step in any writing process is to proofread it. You automatically check your image in a mirror before meeting someone. Your writing is your image on paper. If it is full of spelling and typographical errors, it will detract from what you are trying to get across.