How to Write Better if you are Not a Writer

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Former Technical Writer

Spring 2017
20 Years Writing Experience

- Ultrasonic Welding Troubleshooting Guide
- Software Development Kit Guide
- Network Audit
- User Guide
- Porting Guide

Spring 2017
Tom’s Approach to Writing

• How to Evaluate Writing

• Tom’s Method for Writing

• Some Tom Thoughts About Writing
How to Write Better if you are Not a Writer Professional
We are all Writers

Writers are People Who Write

A Thought About Writing
Tom’s Approach to Writing

- How to Evaluate Writing
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- Some Tom Thoughts About Writing
Writing

A Thought About Writing
Writing Evaluation Criteria

Effectiveness

Quality
Low to High Continuum

Low Effectiveness

Low Quality

High

High
How do we measure Effectiveness?
How do we measure Effectiveness?
Writing with a Purpose

Email Example
Writing with a Purpose

Email Example

Low Effectiveness

High

Spring 2017
Writing Evaluation Criteria

Measure Effectiveness by Result.

Quality
Writing Evaluation Criteria

Measure Effectiveness by Result.

Quality
How do we measure Quality?

Measure Quality by the characteristics of the written piece.
Writing Characteristics

• Does the content match the purpose?
Writing Characteristics

• Does the content match the **purpose**?
• Is the content appropriate for the **audience**?
Writing Characteristics

• Does the content match the **purpose**?
• Is the content appropriate for the **audience**?
• How well is the content **organized**? Do the ideas flow logically?
Writing Characteristics

• Does the content match the **purpose**?
• Is the content appropriate for the **audience**?
• How well is the content **organized**? Do the ideas flow logically?
• Can you easily understand all sentences and paragraphs or do you need to read some multiple times? This is the level of **clarity**.
Writing Characteristics

• Does the content match the **purpose**?
• Is the content appropriate for the **audience**?
• How well is the content **organized**? Do the ideas flow logically?
• Can you easily understand all sentences and paragraphs or do you need to read some multiple times? This is the level of **clarity**.
• How well does it apply the **mechanics** of writing (Grammar, syntax, punctuation)?
Writing Characteristics

• Does the content match the **purpose**?
• Is the content appropriate for the **audience**?
• How well is the content **organized**? Do the ideas flow logically?
• Can you easily understand all sentences and paragraphs or do you need to read some multiple times? This is the level of **clarity**.
• How well does it apply the **mechanics** of writing (Grammar, syntax, punctuation)?
• Is the **style** consistent and appropriate?
Writing Evaluation Criteria

Measure Effectiveness by Result.

Measure Quality by Characteristics of written piece.
Effectiveness—Quality Relationship

• Paradoxical Relationship
• Like a Zen Koan

The higher the quality, the greater the likelihood of being effective

BUT

At the end of the day, Effectiveness is all that matters
How do we Improve Quality?
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Tom’s Writing/Editing Method

1. Does the content match the purpose?
2. Is the content appropriate for the audience?
3. How well is the content organized? Do the ideas flow logically?
4. Can you easily understand all sentences and paragraphs or do you need to read some multiple times? This is the level of clarity.
5. How well does it apply the mechanics of writing (Grammar, syntax, punctuation)?
6. Is the style consistent and appropriate?
Quality Pyramid

- Style
- Mechanics
- Clarity
- Organization
- Audience
- Purpose
Step 1: Define Your Purpose
Step 1: Define Your Purpose

got purpose?
Define Purpose: Minimum

- To persuade/convince
- To inform/tell
- To entertain
- To inquire
- To recount
- To socialise
- To instruct
- To explain
Define Purpose: Better

Write a Purpose Statement

Your Purpose Statement is your **Compass**.

The Purpose of this document is to share with my audience my approach to writing.
Define Purpose: Extra Credit

What do you want your reader to know/do/experience/believe, etc. after reading your writing?
Multiple Purposes?

The more purposes you try to achieve with one piece of writing, the more difficult it is to be effective.
Step 2: Identify Your Audience
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• Specific individuals

• **Class** of individuals to whom you wish to write to accomplish your purpose

• **Class** = group of individuals that share a common set of characteristics related to your purpose
Examples of Audience Class Characteristics

Common Interest

Common Activity

Common Membership
Can there be Multiple Audiences?

Yes

Multiple Classes

Relevant differences among the class members, such as different levels of knowledge related to the purpose.
Can there be Multiple Audiences?

Yes

But

The more audiences you try to write to within one piece of writing, the more difficult it is to be effective.
Step 3: Draft Your Content

Purpose + Audience = Content
What does your audience need to know in order to accomplish the purpose for which you are writing?

If you don’t have the right information for your purpose, you can’t be effective.
What should I Write?

• What does your audience need to know in order to accomplish the purpose for which you are writing?

• What does your audience already know in relation to the purpose for which you are writing?
Capturing Your Ideas

I know what I want to say, but . . . .
What is your learning style?

• Visual – diagram your ideas; try mind mapping; put your ideas on sticky notes and move around

• Auditory – find someone to talk to about your ideas; record yourself talking about your ideas; listen to yourself

• Read/Write – create an outline; just start writing; read something similar to what you want to write

• Kinesthetic – get out of your chair and move around; juggle; shoot nerf baskets
Don’t

stare at a blank piece of paper or a blank monitor

Do

Something
Step 4: Organize Your Content

- Order – In what order do you present your ideas?
- Grouping – What visual cues do you give your reader by dividing your ideas into chapters, sections, paragraphs?
Patterns of Organization

- Chronological Patterns
- Sequential Patterns
- Spatial Patterns
- Compare-Contrast Patterns
- Advantages- Disadvantages Patterns
- Cause-Effect Patterns
- Problem-Solution Patterns
- Topical Patterns
Organization Schemes

Organization schemes have to do with how you are going to categorize your content and the various ways you'll create relationships between each piece. Most content can be categorized in multiple ways. Schemes can be broken down into Exact and Subjective. Depending on the content, it's conceivable that the site may combine schemes as opposed to treating them independently.

Exact Organization Schemes

Exact organization schemes objectively divide information into mutually exclusive sections. These systems comparatively are easy for information architects to create and categorize content within. However, they can be a challenge at times for users. It requires that the user understands how what they are looking for fits within the model. Examples of exact organizational structures include:

- **Alphabetical schemes** make use of our 26-letter alphabet for organizing their contents.
Step 5: Review for Clarity

Is every word and sentence meaningful?

Read your writing as if you were your audience.

Ask someone else to “test read” before sending to your intended audience.
Clarity Example

“We wanted to share some information gleaned from our experience with the wider IT pro community . . .”

Does the sentence mean:

the information was gleaned from experience with the wider IT pro community

OR

We want to share some information with the wider IT pro community
Step 6: Review for Mechanics

- Sentence Structure
- Word Choice
- Punctuation
- Capitalization
- Voice
Applying Mechanics

Can I say it:

• More precisely?
• More concisely?
• More directly?
• More simply?
• More clearly?
How to improve Mechanics

• Take a writing class
• Read and Write more
• Write and get feedback
• Read about writing
• Listen to interviews with authors
• Read to analyze writing
  1. Read to understand
  2. Reread to examine HOW it was said
  3. Ask yourself how else it could have been written
  4. Ask yourself how YOU would have written it
Step 7: Review for Style

• “Writing style is the choice of words, sentence structure, and paragraph structure” -- Wikipedia

• Formal vs. Informal -- which is appropriate when?
• Style Guides
• Personal Expression
Quality Pyramid

- Style
- Mechanics
- Clarity
- Organization
- Audience
- Purpose
Let’s Review

Key Concepts
We are all Writers

Writers are People Who Write
Writing Evaluation Criteria

Measure **Effectiveness** by Result.

Measure **Quality** by the characteristics of the written piece.
Quality Pyramid

Purpose

Audience

Organization

Clarity

Mechanics

Style
Purpose + Audience = Content
What should I Write?

What does your audience need to know in order to accomplish the purpose for which you are writing?
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Thoughts About Writing

Why is this important?
Writing = Communication Across Time & Distance

A Thought About Writing
Writers

Good  Bad

A Thought About Writing
A piece of writing stands on its own.
It’s not about You!

A piece of writing stands on its own.
One more Paradox

• When you are writing, the document is yours. It’s your work and you put your heart and soul into it.

• When you send it out, it no longer belongs to you.

A Thought About Writing
Thank You!

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