

TIPS FOR WRITING ARTICLES AND REPORTS

by Dr. Linda Hancock

So often I meet very intelligent individuals who claim that they have problems putting their thoughts on paper. I read articles and reports from professionals at times and either don't understand what the work was about or end up being confused by the end of it because of poor structure or complex language.

As a newspaper columnist, I am aware that most editors aim to write at a level that the average twelve year old will understand.

Warren Buffet, the billionaire businessman, reformed the way that Annual Reports for his companies were crafted. He instructed his staff to imagine that they were preparing a report for his sister, who did not understand anything about business. He challenged them to write in a manner that would help her to know exactly what was happening in the companies after returning to the country from a two-year vacation. He wanted it to be very simple for any person who ever picked up an Annual Report to learn from it.

There are several things that you can do to improve your written work as follows:

1. **Change your self-talk** – I have found it very interesting over the years to note that my psychology clients tend to say what they do not want instead of what they do want. Then they are surprised when they get it! Stating “I can't sleep” or “My marriage doesn't have a chance” or “I will likely always be broke” can be self-fulfilling prophesies. Try saying what you do want and notice the difference that this will make in your life. “I am improving my writing skills every day” is a far better message than “I am a horrible writer”. Remember, it is important that you say what you want instead of what you don't want.
2. **Set up an appropriate writing environment** – Make sure that you have the proper tools to do your writing. If you prefer using longhand, have notepads and good pens for the job. Those who prefer writing while typing need to have a computer and printer that have features which will save you some time and produce a professional product. You will also need a physical space that offers a clean work area, comfortable chair and silence. Don't try to convince yourself that writing at the kitchen counter while making dinner, typing into an iPhone while riding a bus or jotting notes between clients will give you satisfaction or the results that you desire. Oh, and those who think that they work better with a television or radio playing in the background are just kidding themselves. Any form of noise is a distraction that will not help you.
3. **Choose a time when you will not be interrupted** – I prefer to write all of my reports after the professional building (where I have an office) is closed for the day. This prevents traffic from just “stopping in” for a casual chat. I never answer my telephone, reply to emails or take text

messages when I am writing. Choose a time of the day when you are most alert and schedule your writing into a block during that timeframe.

4. **Learn to focus** – A few years ago Tiger Woods was asked by a reporter why he was such a good golfer. He gave what I thought was an excellent answer. He said “I focus better than anyone else”. You see when he is facing wind or rainy conditions with television camera and crowds following him on the course, he has to be able to focus on the tiny ball in front of him or he won’t hit it. As a child his father would walk behind Tiger just when he was swinging and drop a handful of golf clubs on the ground. Tiger learned to golf despite what might be distractions to other people. When you are writing, you need to do the same thing. Your writing project is the only thing on which you should be focused.
5. **Consider your limitations** – Years ago, as a Child Welfare Investigator, I was told that my documentation must always be done within 24 hours of client contact. It was explained to me that if I was called as a witness into Court, my credibility would be in question and the opposing lawyer would argue that memory fails dramatically after this period of time. I know my limitations when it comes to remembering details and find it so much easier to write my reports as close to the information gathering as possible. Also, I frankly do not want to store the lives of all my clients in long-term memory! I resolve this by gathering information and writing my report in the same day as it is collected. You see, you might have to force yourself into the chair in order to begin when you would prefer to procrastinate but you will never finish something until you have begun. Thinking about it does not move you forward. I know lots of people who have been thinking about writing a book for many years but haven’t written the first page!
6. **Set deadlines for yourself** – I never leave the office unless my paperwork is done. I figure that if a person can’t pay their mortgage one month it will be much more difficult to try to make two mortgage payments the following month! It is the same thing with paperwork. Many professionals try to convince themselves and others that working with the clients is more important than doing paperwork. Try having a client die unexpectedly and you will soon be embarrassed if the file is seized without you having a chance to catch up on the documentation that you have been neglecting. Reports for my Substance Abuse Assessments must be done within 24 hours of the clinical interview. I never miss a deadline. You don’t need to have an external source set goals for you. Set some for yourself and you will be surprised at how often you meet them.
7. **Practice self-care** – All I hear these days is about how busy people are and how stressed they feel. Perhaps they need to schedule their time differently. Try thinking of your work as “projects” rather than appointments. Most professionals book one client after another all day long and then face desks that are stacked with files to be handled. Try booking time to complete each project. For example, a one-hour face-to-face appointment followed by a one-hour report writing time and a half hour for billing and filing will keep the desk clean and give you a feeling of satisfaction. It is psychologically empowering to have a couple of “that’s done”

moments in your day rather than several encounters with no completions. When I see new mediation clients and know that they will be back, I still write as much of their report as possible after the first session. That way, I can begin our second appointment by reading what I have written. This practice allows the clients and me to do some editing and all be at the same starting point for our time together. Plan your day so that you feel confident and in control. Soon you will notice that your stress level is reduced and you will be the envy of the office!

8. **Develop templates** – Because my practice is diversified I have several different formats that are used over and over again. Each of these is saved in a computer document folder so that I can easily open the file, customize the information and save it again under the client name. Templates are not only helpful for formal reports, but also can be used for smaller tasks. For example, I have a letterhead template on my desktop, which contains frequently used phrases and my standard letter ending with name, credentials and designations. Also, whenever I find myself repeating or typing the same information for others more than two times I develop a Signature file in my email. Then, when I am asked for this information the next time, I merely insert the appropriate Signature file into an email and everyone is happy in a matter of seconds!
9. **Know what information you will need before you gather it** – It is important to know the things that you will need to create a detailed report. I usually develop a “cheat sheet” for each type of project that I am working on and then just fill in the blanks as I go. For example, the Parenting Plan form that I use began as a simple sheet of paper with reminders of the things that I had missed in previous reports. Over time, I kept revising and revising the form until now I have several pages that the clients and I complete together. When we are done, we have all the information for a beautiful Parenting Plan. The form also keeps us on track and prevents the discussion from drifting into areas that are not pertinent to the work.
10. **Keep it simple** – Write the same way that you would talk to a young but intelligent grandchild. You need to tell a story that is interesting enough to capture attention and simple enough to be understandable. Begin by stating why you are involved in telling this story and describe the characters that are involved. Use language that is easily understood and stay away from words that others might not know. Imagine that you are writing a story that will be found by historians hundreds of years from now. Would they be able to read it and not only know what you were talking about but also enjoy it? Sometimes, if I am stuck on a phrase or sentence, I will talk out loud. I begin with “What do I want to say?” and then answer as though I was asked the question by someone else. Then I write down my answer word-for-word. You see, the world is your audience – not just a judge, or a client, or a newspaper subscriber. You should be writing so that anyone could pick up your work and totally understand what they are reading.
11. **The journalistic approach** – Have you ever heard of who, what, when, where and why? That is the way that journalists are usually trained to write their stories. You do not need to introduce the type of media sensationalism that is designed to capture the attention of a reader or listener but you do need to have enough details so that the reader isn’t left with too many questions

because of missing information. Think about driving throughout North America on a family holiday. You will likely benefit greatly from having a map and watching for signs along the highway. A good introduction will be the map for your reader. It will help the person to know where they are going and what places they will pass along the way. Headings or divisions with numbering or bullets throughout the report are the highway signs that help your reader to know where they are as they travel. Make it easy for the person who has decided to travel with you by breaking up the journey with interesting stops along the way!

12. **Read aloud to yourself** - When you have completely finished the work read it to yourself out loud. Use a slow and steady voice but always have an analytical ear. If someone was reading this report to you, would you understand what was being said? Are things organized in appropriate groups? Do you remember the lyrics to the Sesame Street song that asked “One of these things is not like the others. Which one is it? Do you know?” Challenge yourself to ensure that you have things that belong together in the same section. Remember, think like a child – with simplicity!

Writing, whether it is in the form of fiction, newspaper articles, love letters or formal professional reports allow you to express yourself and relay your knowledge to others. It will be most welcome, however, if the words that you use tell an interesting story that the reader can understand and enjoy.

And so, it is time for you to begin. Why don't you start thinking in the most widely accepted format for story telling?

Once upon a time....

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