

Great Writing Skills - the shortest path!

This is the shortest path you will ever find to becoming **great at writing!**

This document is not technical: it uses no grammar jargon. (Like: present perfect tense, for example.)

Work-oriented design: the format is simple with instances and examples of usage. You are expected to keep this handy and look into the exact area that you are trying to ace. Then use the templated sentences, use-cases and simple tips to achieve your goal: become a great writer!

Writing to Get Attention

- ✓ The first few words of a sentence.
- ✓ The first sentence of a paragraph
- ✓ The first paragraph of a page
- ✓ The first page of a set of pages
- ✓ The first chapter of a book

Hook the reader with the first few words so they read the paragraph.

It was so engrossing! The reader thought she would read only one sentence; but she read the full paragraph! The page went without realizing that a set of paragraphs were read. And a number of pages went without my realizing it!

That, is for authors of fictional writing. Business writing is different but not by too much.

This document contains the following sections:

1. [Brevity, Clarity and Completeness](#)
2. [Language](#)
 - i. [Past, Present & Future](#)
 - ii. [Commas, semi-colons, colons and full-stops \(the period\).](#)
 - iii. [And, Or and Because](#)
 - iv. [A, An, The](#)
 - v. [Using the apostrophe: it's tricky!](#)
 - vi. [Spell-check and Grammar-check](#)
3. [A Pinch of Salt to take good to Great!](#)



1. The Golden Triangle of a good report: Being Brief, Clear and Complete

Cover everything, in brief, accurately.

- Step 1:** Write everything down. Be complete. Do not pay attention to sequencing or grammar.
- Step 2:** Arrange what you wrote in the order that events occurred.
- Step 3:** Arrange them again – a second version – in the order of importance.
- Step 4:** Wherever occurrence and importance rankings match, that is the correct flow to start with.
- Step 5:** Reduce the number of words in your draft without losing clarity.
- Step 6:** Check for clarity: you may end up adding back words
- Step 7:** Check for accuracy: you may end up adding back words
- Step 8:** Reduce the number of words
- Step 9:** Repeat steps 5, 6 and 7.
- Step 10:** Work on your words, sentences and grammar.

To do this you need time. Give yourself the time you need to complete this process.

The trick to getting more time is to **NOT** try to get it right the very first time. Complete Step 1 very quickly. You will be surprised at how much time you will still have at hand if you dump - or write out - everything you know about a case or report in Step 1.

Breaking the task down into these iterative steps saves a lot of time, even though it looks like more work at the first glance.

A steady process is faster than a mad scramble.

In business writing facts can be stated telegraphically. In a storybook the facts unfold: it is a part of the art of story-telling.

In business writing it is normal to see facts fit in a dashboard. The rules cited earlier serve us well: the first words; the first sentence; the first paragraph.

Therefore, we have an executive summary for longer reports. Even a page needs to have an opening para that serves as an executive summary.

A single paragraph could have a summary too: that is the purpose served by a headline.

And of course, in the subject box for an email, state the point of the mail in the first three to five words.

2. Language

Language makes a difference. Humans have become used to comfortable writing. Language errors are uncomfortable and off-putting.

Besides, readers judge the rest of the writing, or the writer, based on language. So, the report may be important and yet, it may remain unread. That is unfair in one sense.

But look at it this way: if you get the language and grammar right you can make an outsize positive impression!

Punctuation and grammar are therefore, important.

Grammar has an additional impact. It can distort facts. If we mean a storm is to come and write that the storm has been here: those are two different things! Unfortunately, all instances of grammatical errors are not that clear.

i. Past, Present and Future

Instead of reproducing a whole book on English grammar, we present a templated set of sentences.

When in doubt, refer to this section to see whether your sentence construct belongs in the past, present or future.

We use an event to develop the template.

Serial numbers # 1 to # 7 are a simple progression from past to future. #8 and # 9 are more complex situations.

The Event:

Thousands of people protesting the world over.

*1. If this happened in the **past** how would you word it?*

Thousands **protested** all over the world.

2. If this happened in the past and you want to report it as a historical event:

Thousands **had protested** all over the world.

3. If it happens whenever there is an occasion or reason to:

Thousands **protest** all over the world whenever governments try to enforce social distancing.

4. If it was happening right now:

Thousands **are protesting** all over the world.

5. If it started in the past and is continuing as we write this:

Thousands **have started to protest** all over the world.

6. If it is going to start:

Thousands **are to protest** all over the world.

7. If it is going to start in New York and spread all over the world:

Thousands **are to protest** in New York; other cities are to join later.

8. You went to New York in the past; it was happening:

When I arrived in New York last year, thousands **were protesting**.

9. You went to New York in the past; it happened, then stopped:

When I arrived in New York last year, thousands **had protested**.

Another Instance

The Event:

Endosulfan ban; 60 countries

1. Write it as an event that has happened and is ongoing

Endosulfan **is banned** in 60 countries.
(NOT: Endosulfan **has been** banned in 60 countries.)

2. Write it as an event that has happened and is no longer ongoing (in force)

Endosulfan **had been** banned in 60 countries and that ban has **now been** lifted.

3. Write it as an event that may happen.

Endosulfan **may be** banned in the coming days.
Endosulfan **might be** banned in the coming days.

4. Write it as an event that will happen.

Endosulfan **is going to be** banned in the coming days.

ii. Commas, semi-colons, colons and full-stops (the period).

Use commas, semi-colons, colons and the full-stop. It lets your reader stop for breath. Shorter sentences are easier to digest than long ones.

Use the rule-guide below to get it right.

1: If we want you to use commas it is because commas help give a pause, you see?

In this sentence the comma is placed after the word 'pause' so that the reader gets a visual break.

2: Sometimes we want you to pause for a longer period of time; it helps you think.

In this sentence the semi-colon is a long pause. After the semi-colon a separate but related idea is presented.

3: And sometimes, we want you to say "look at what follows"; an example follows.

Here are some uses of a good writing guide: to study, to refer and to apply rules simply.

After the colon in this sentence, some points are mentioned which might have been presented as a series of bullet points.

The sentence used at # 3 shows the use of commas and semi-colons. They are marked in orange in that sentence!

Some Tips on emails:

- ☒ Do not 'reply all' unless you are sure about what you are doing.
- ☒ Change the subject of a reply to make it relevant to what your reply is about.
- ☒ Do not use language abbreviations acceptable in social media.
- ☒ Business abbreviations (abbrev.) should be mentioned in full at the first instance in your report, as show in this sentence; and later on you can use the abbrev.

iii. And, Or and Because

What is 'and'?

'And' joins two sentences into one. In the interest of constructing short sentences that are easy to grasp, experiment with the full-stop (period); the semi-colon to see which of the options serves you best. Use 'and' if it serves you best.

What is 'or'?

'Or' is an alternative between two or more things, choices or actions.

What is 'because'?

'Because' is used to explain cause-effect relationships. The use of 'because' should be treated similar to how 'and' is used; it can make sentences long. Sentences that contain 'because' can be broken down using words similar to: because, since, therefore etc. ([See section on using other words that mean the same thing; also known as 'synonyms'.](#))

iv. A. An. The.

These refer to objects. Do not use them to refer to people. Do not, for example, say: "The Jane said..."

"Jane said..." will do.

A and an: use interchangeably; 'an' is used when the object name begins with a vowel.

A book. An eagle.

Use 'the' when referring to a specific object. *The report* means a particular report. *A report* means a report in a general sense.

- * The report on arms smuggling shook up the nation.
- * A report on arms smuggling is long overdue.

v. Using the apostrophe: it's tricky!

Take this sentence as an example: Syngenta's plant in Chicago is *its* main production facility.

There is one instance of the use of "apostrophe s" and another instance of using "its" without an apostrophe.

When to use 's?

Replay to see if it is correct:

If the 's is correct that means: it belongs. 'Belongs' can be rewritten as: "of"; 'Plant of Syngenta'. Is that correct? Yes, it is; therefore 'Syngenta's plant' is correct; okay to use.

Replay to see if it is correct:

And what is the difference between 'it is', 'its' and 'it's'

If the 's is correct that means it belongs. Belongs can be rewritten as: "of"; 'It is of Chicago'.

Is that correct? No, it is not; therefore 'Chicago's its' would be incorrect. Then do not use the apostrophe: use 'is'.

'Chicago is its main production facility'

(NOT ' 'Chicago's is its main production facility')

Replay to see if it is correct:

If you have used 'it's' with an apostrophe, change it to 'it is'.

Does it still make sense? 'Chicago is it is main production facility.' It does not make sense. Do not use apostrophe. This 'its' [without apostrophe] means 'belongs'.

'Chicago is its main production facility'

(NOT ' 'Chicago's is it's main production facility')

vi. Spell-check and Grammar-check

Use spell check and grammar check in MSWord.

A word of caution: it is not an automatic process. Think about every suggestion the software makes and change those which you agree with. Ignore those you do not agree with.

3. A Pinch of Salt for Great Writing

Here are three states of writing: Technically correct, good at writing and being great at writing. The difference between these three states is very small. It takes just a pinch of salt to bring the taste of a dish of come alive!

A pinch of **variety in words** goes a long way.

Use the following approach to build your menu of words! Start by writing your first draft as you feel comfortable. Then locate and hunt down and replace some of the words in your first draft as shown below.

Using alternate words to add quality to your writing (The use of synonyms).

Here is a paragraph that is technically correct but not very elegant.

Since the chemical causes deaths it is banned. Since it is banned it is unavailable for its benefits. Since it is banned the company has lost a chunk of sales. Since its sales are down the stock is underperforming in the market.

Here is how to make this set of sentences – a paragraph – elegant.

In MSWord, find the menu option “Tools”. Under that locate Thesaurus, as shown below. In the window there, enter the word ‘since’. It will list out a set of words with the same meaning as ‘since’.

Each word in that list can in turn be entered in the Thesaurus to generate still more options. Develop and keep this list of words handy.

This appears on the right, in a new panel

I enter the word 'because'

And this gives me a range of words and phrases that I can use. Do I need that many?

These are the expressions I can use for 'cause-effect'.

Annotations in the Thesaurus window:

- meanwhile (adv.) Adverb; "Since the sushil has modified the course..."
- from the time when (adv.) Past tense
- ever since (Dictionary Form)
- as (conj.)
- because
- while
- given that (Dictionary Form)
- seeing as (Dictionary Form)
- in view of the fact that (Dictionary Form)

In most specific areas of work there are only a finite set of words that keep repeating. For each of those words, develop this working list; or you can just get very comfortable using the Thesaurus 'on the fly' or as you go.

Here are words that can be interchangeably used with one another (synonyms):

- * Since
- * Because
- * Owing to
- * Given that
- * In view of the fact
- * For that reason
- * So
- * As a result
- * Consequently
- * As a consequence
- * In view of that
- * Then
- * Thus
- * Hence
- * Therefore
- * Accordingly
- * And so

Replacing the word since in the inelegant paragraph we saw earlier, we get:

*The chemical was banned **since** it causes deaths. **As a result** of being banned it is unavailable for its benefits. **Owing to** the ban the company has lost a chunk of sales. **As a consequence** the stock is underperforming in the market.*

(The substitute word / phrase is highlighted in orange.)

The original paragraph used the word 'since' four times. We now have four different expressions that make the paragraph elegant and we did it rather easily!

Here is another set of words.

These are interchangeable for something that is unproven but suspected to have happened. It is particularly useful in incident or fraud reports where an enquiry has still not been completed.

- * Supposed
- * Suspected
- * So-called
- * Assumed
- * Apparent
- * Purported
- * Claimed
- * Charged
- * Contended
- * Presumed
- * Assumed
- * Believed
- * Thought
- * Guessed
- * Postulated
- * Posited
- * Gathered

Find all the words and situations that recur in your work and keep word-lists ready to use as the salt and spice that makes your writing terrific!

Verb-Noun Confusion

Take the word 'study'.

Here is how NOT to do use this word: "The study was studied.'

The word 'study' can mean a **report**. It can also mean to **examine the report**. In preceding two sentences we used 'report' and 'examining a report'. That is how clarity is achieved. Here are two examples

- ☒ The study was examined.
- ☒ The report was studied.

Here is a list of words that are 'things' (nouns) but can also be used as 'actions we take' (verbs):

- * Study
- * Report
- * Analysis
- * Review
- * Research

- * Inquiry
- * Examination
- * Search

Instead of using the same word for both the 'thing' and the 'action' simply use the synonym approach discussed earlier and apply it.

In addition, be sure to use the correct form of past, present or future and here is a working list to keep handy:

- * **Study:** To study, studied, studies, will study
- * **Report:** To report, reports, reported, will report
- * **Analyse:** To analyse, analyses, analysed, will analyse
- * **Review:** To review, reviews, reviewed, will review
- * **Research:** To research, researches, researched, will research
- * **Enquire:** To enquire, enquires, enquired, will enquire
- * **Examine:** To examine, examines, examined, will examine
- * **Search:** To search, searches, searched, will search

Comments on the quality or nature of things; Qualifiers

These words tell us something about the event or object.

A well-written report: 'well-written' is a qualifier.

When someone says a report is well-written, an opinion is being added. This opinion could be challenged: "Who told you it is well-written?"

To be cautious one might avoid using qualifiers. The following list of words are qualifiers:

- * Diligently
- * Meticulously
- * Thoroughly
- * Attentively
- * Carefully
- * Vigorously
- * Rigorously
- * Relentlessly

From this list, we can use a qualifier to advice you to use qualifiers **carefully!**

For more guidance on using this template, intense practice sessions and further guidance, contact us through L&OD!