

Technical Writing Course

Excerpt



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PLAN

Clarify Your Writing Task
Make a Schedule
Determine Your Purpose
Analyze Your Readers
Define Your Scope
Review Documentation and WordPerfect Standards
Use a Planning Checklist

BRAINSTORM

Freewrite
Cluster
Write a Preliminary Abstract
Ask Questions
Examine the Readers' Perspective
Create Contradictory Statements
Use Other Documents as Models

ORGANIZE

Follow Principles of Organization
Make an Outline

WRITE

- Prewrite
- Write with Ease
- Use a Word Processor
- Overcome Writer's Block

REVISE: INTRODUCTION

REVISE: PART ONE

- Guarantee the Correct Content
- Make Your Visuals Effective
- Use Skillful Emphasis Techniques
- Use Peer Review

REVISE: PART TWO

- Learn to Recognize Bad Writing Style
- Learn to Appreciate Good Writing Style
- Edit Your Work
- Develop Effective Paragraphs
- Develop Effective Sentences

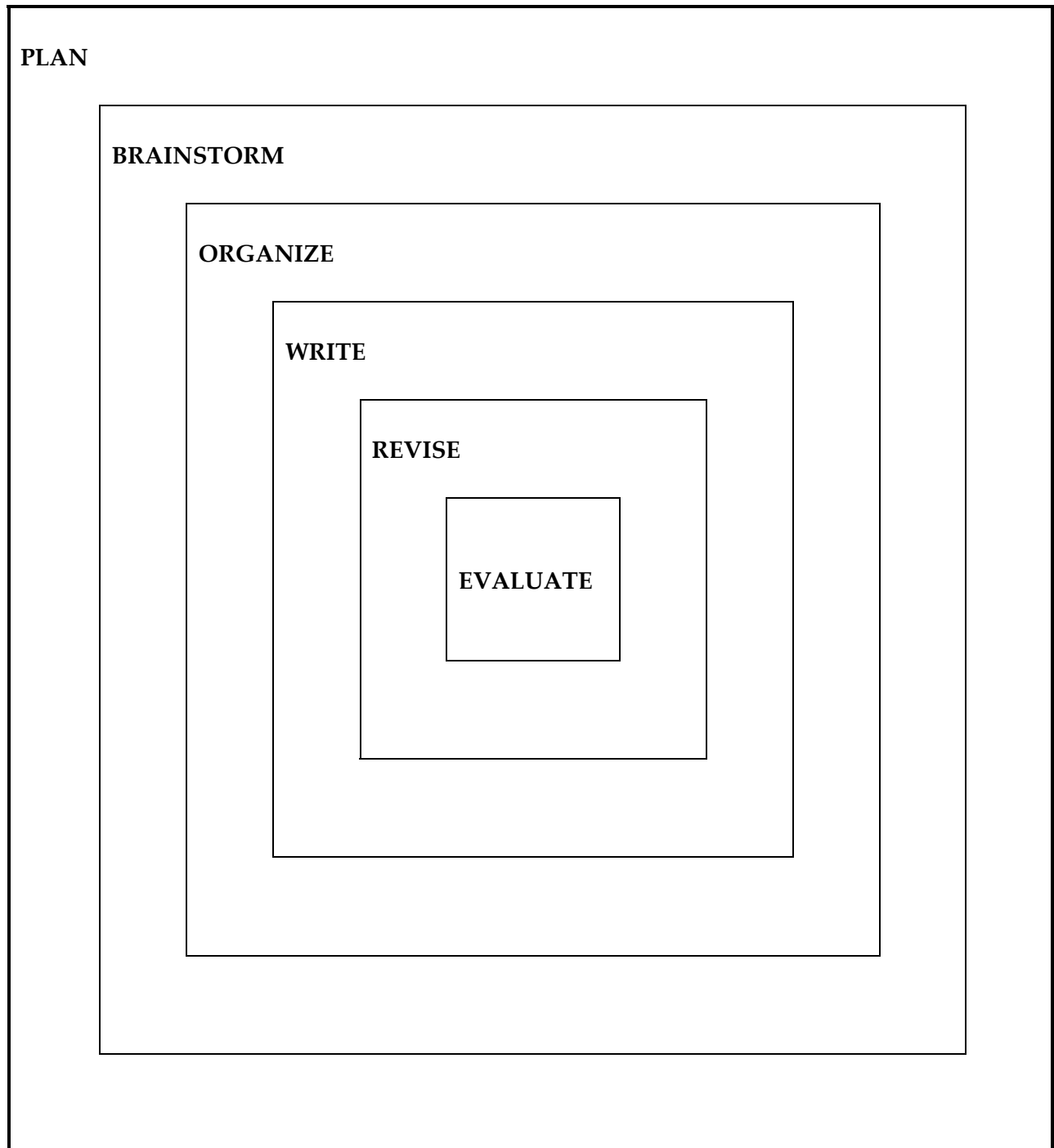
REVISE: PART THREE

- Make Verbs Active
- Use Strong Verbs
- Make Subjects and Verbs Agree
- Choose the Right Verb Tense
- Use Parallel Structure
- Remove False Subjects
- Make References Clear
- Make Your Writing Concise
- Choose Simple Words

EVALUATE

- Recognize Common Problems
- Determine if Your Document Is Usable
- Request Feedback From Others

A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO WRITING



INTRODUCTION

This Technical Writing Course will teach you how to do the following:

- Develop a technical document in a work environment
- Ask the planning questions that will determine the project's success
- Brainstorm for ideas
- Understand the purpose of an outline
- Organize your information
- Understand the basic principles of good writing style
- Develop a crisp, readable style
- Focus on your reader
- Control the first draft and revisions
- Decide when the document is finished
- Evaluate the document according to initial project requirements
- Provide quality control checks throughout the process.

The Purpose of Documentation

The purpose of documentation is to transmit information explicitly and accurately to help others understand and use a product.

Documents are important because knowledge is useless unless it is effectively transmitted and acquired. Products such as software are based on complex technology. Understandably, customers often find it difficult to understand and use such products. Documentation makes products usable. If a document about a product is well written, that document can and often does improve customer satisfaction with that product.

A product is useless to users unless they can understand how to use it to get a job done. And the faster that knowledge can be communicated, the better the product performs. A product truly exists only to the degree to which users perceive how and why it is useful. Further, a product truly exists only to the degree to which users find it easy to use.

Documents transmit important information about products to users. As such, writers need to focus on human factors such as ease of use, clear instructions, and effective training for their readers. Good documents take a human factors approach and often must compensate for the lack of such an approach in the product itself.

Bad Documents Are Not Usable

A good document keeps user overhead to a minimum. Why is that important? What are some of the hidden costs of bad documents?

When users first pick up one of your documents, how do they feel about it? Do they have to search for information, constantly flipping pages? Do they have to spend time trying to figure out what your acronyms, abbreviations, and terms mean? Do they have to deal with out-of-order steps in instructions? Do they have to muddle through bulky words and awkward sentences? Can they actually use the document to accomplish a task easily and quickly with minimal frustration? Is your document truly usable?

Costs of Bad Documentation

- Endless searches for information
- Ongoing one-on-one training and training workshops
- Continual self-teaching with no sense of learning
- Frustration
- Downtime caused by lengthy installations and adjustments
- High learning curves
- Lower productivity
- The end result: the job does not get done on time.

Good Documents Are Usable

A product is a tool, something that can satisfy a need or a want. A product can be a thing, a service, a procedure or process, an organization, a place, information, or an idea. The key feature of a product is the service (benefit) it gives to your customers. Customers tend to assess the benefits of a product in order to determine its value to them.

Without a document, a product is merely a *potential* product. When complemented by a good document, however, a product becomes a *true* product—a tool for solving your customers' problems.

A Good Document

- Introduces functions and benefits
- Demonstrates installation and setup
- Warns against errors and bugs
- Describes features and benefits
- Teaches more productive methods
- Explains shortcuts
- Clarifies problems and solutions
- Identifies problems that require expert help
- Enables user independence from developers.

Technical Writing 101

The writing of a document is a large, complex project that involves many people. Problems often occur unless the project is handled properly.

Many documents are ineffective, sloppy, and inaccurate. It is hard to explain complicated technical ideas to people who know less than you do. Write well because so many readers are at your mercy. Write well because poor writing hurts more than readers. To your readers, you are what you write. Ineffective writing hurts both your credibility and your organization's credibility.

We generally write with the hope that readers will examine our ideas seriously. But such a thorough examination can happen only if the readers understand the message. Regardless of your intention, you will fail in your purpose if you readers

- Find your writing so complex or tedious that they stop reading before the end
- Misunderstand your message
- React negatively to the quality of its presentation.

Readers resent unnecessary burdens on their time and concentration. Don't write unorganized, imprecise, or wordy documents. Readers may lose confidence in a document that is marred by illogical organization, unnecessary bulk, careless grammar, or mindless punctuation. And keep in mind that readers won't appraise a poorly written document with a receptive or neutral attitude; instead, they'll be hypercritical.

Write documents for your readers, not for yourself. You must strive to keep readers attentive. The most reliable way to do so is to offer immediate clarity and quick comprehension. *Writing for quick comprehension is the first duty of the technical writer.* Writing that cannot be comprehended quickly can scarcely be called good technical writing.

In technical writing, you report factual information objectively for the practical use of your readers. This information is based on your experiences, observations, and interpretations in a certain field. The purpose of technical writing is to inform and to persuade by providing facts (and opinions based on facts) that help readers answer a question, solve a problem, make a decision, or perform a task. Your writing must give readers the information they need—clearly and objectively.

What Is Good Writing?

Good writing is ORGANIZED. The document starts at a good point, has a sense of easy, natural movement, goes somewhere, and then stops. One idea follows the next in an orderly way. The document has an underlying plan that the reader can follow. Ideas are treated in proportion to their importance, with major points receiving the greatest length and emphasis. All points are clearly related to each other and to the main idea.

Good writing is FULL OF IDEAS. A well-written document has many ideas. It discusses each point long enough to show clearly what is meant but no longer. It supports each main point with details that give readers a reason for believing the idea.

Good writing reflects PROPER WORD USAGE. The document reflects the writer's interest in putting words together to be clear, forceful, and interesting. Words are correct, precise, and imaginative. Words are chosen with an understanding of the readers.

Good writing reflects the writer's STYLE. The writing sounds like a person, not a committee. The writing is sincere and is drawn from the writer's own knowledge and experience. The writing reflects the writer's personality and attitude toward readers and toward the subject.

Good writing is CLEAR. Freedom from ambiguity, vagueness, and obscurity. You are truly clear not when your words can be understood but when they cannot be misunderstood.

Good writing is CONCISE. The document is efficient and free from waste. The writer is concerned about saving the reader's time and concentration.

Good writing is full of WELL-STRUCTURED SENTENCES. The document follows accepted forms of usage for written English. Sentence structure is correct and varied. Sentences are short and simple rather than long and complicated.

Good writing respects the rules of GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION. The document follows the rules of grammar, punctuation, capitalization, abbreviations, and numbers.

Good writing is FREE OF SPELLING AND TYPOGRAPHICAL ERRORS. The document is free of spelling errors. The writer takes the time to proofread carefully and consult a dictionary.

Good writing is VISUALLY APPEALING. The document is aesthetically pleasing. It makes good use of white space. Readers are drawn to, not intimidated by, its appearance.

The Writing Process

One reason many people dislike writing is that it takes so much time. Writing a report seems to take twice as long as finding the information or presenting the ideas orally. That loss of time can be frustrating.

Think for a minute how long it takes you now to write even a memo, a letter, a report, or even an entire section of a technical document in one step. This writing process takes so long because you're really trying to do the following six things simultaneously:

1. Plan
2. Brainstorm
3. Organize
4. Write
5. Revise
6. Evaluate

You're trying to think of what you have to say, to write it down, and to get it correct—all at the same time. This is also why it's so hard to get started and why you're rarely satisfied with what you've written.

By breaking this one big step into six parts, you'll discover two things right away: The time you usually spend writing will be cut in half, and the quality of your writing will improve. In the same time it takes people using traditional writing techniques to write their opening sentences, you will have completed the first two steps of the writing process presented in this course. Furthermore, this six-step process contains all of the principles of good writing. Only the format will change.

Writers tend not to concentrate on the most important thing—saying what they mean. If you want to become a good writer (or at least a more effective, more versatile writer), you will need to work on expressing your ideas clearly and accurately. This course is designed to help you develop your skills in developing well-written, well-organized, and usable technical documentation.