

How to Write for the Web

A writer's guide to producing clear, consistent online communication



by Linda Ray and Mark Bloom
Ray Access (rayaccess.com)

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If you're a beginning writer, an occasional writer, or even a practiced writer, **you may approach a new writing assignment with trepidation**. Even if you have a general idea of what you want to say, even if you have a goal you hope to accomplish with your words, you're not sure where to start. And then there are the voices in your head that tell you:

- You can't write.
- You don't have enough time.
- It won't be good enough.
- This is a lost cause.

It's understandable. At Ray Access, we sit before that intimidating blank screen every day. **Doubts are never far from the surface**. But we're professionals. We know that if we simply do what's worked so well in the past, there's no reason to think it won't work again. And it does, every time.



Our Value, Your Goal

With this ebook, we share our biggest secret: **a time-honored process that's worked for writers for centuries**. Since we write website content and blog posts,

we've tweaked the traditional process so it works well for online writing. After reading this ebook, you too will be able to write for the web effectively and efficiently.

By following this practical, proven process, you'll learn how to ensure that your writing flows succinctly from Point A to Point B. To avoid misinterpretation, you'll learn to **write what you mean and mean what you write**. And you'll learn how to develop a focused, clear plan to help you write anything — from an email or blog post to an electronic report or e-newsletter. Here's how.

Clarity Is Priceless

Ever find yourself shouting: “But that’s not what I meant!” When your words are unclear or ambiguous, your message runs the risk of being misinterpreted. Poorly written business documents can produce potentially dangerous consequences and unintended results. **Miscommunication can lead to:**

- Lost revenue
- Broken relationships
- Punitive lawsuits
- Lost time
- Invalid assumptions
- Incorrect responses and actions

Strong online writing skills reduce misunderstandings, saving your business time and money. Well-chosen and well-organized words increase the likelihood that you’ll achieve your goals. If you’re already a good writer, this process won’t confine your work; it will refine it.

Follow the Process

Online writing is still writing, and although it differentiates in some places from hard-copy writing, the process remains basically the same. **Online business writing includes these six steps:**

1. Preparation
2. Research
3. Organization
4. The Outline
5. A First Draft
6. Review and Revision

By following these steps, **you can develop writing skills** that will serve you well in business and beyond. You’ll be able to knock out a blog post, an important email, a monthly report or a review in no time. Writing a 500-word blog post shouldn’t take all day, even for a beginning writer.

Step 1: Preparation

Preparing to write is just as important as the act itself. And it's just not about clearing your mind or focusing your thoughts. Begin with a clear objective. To **reach your goals and hit your targets**, you have to at least determine whether you're trying to sell, inform or entertain.

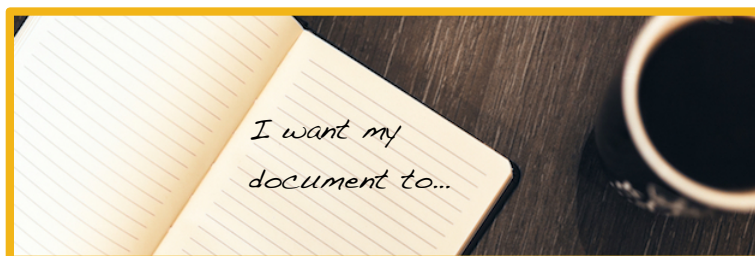
To write effectively, to convey exactly what you want to say and to get it done in record time — **answer these three fundamental questions**:

1. What is your article's objective?
2. Who are your readers?
3. What is the scope of your work?

Establish Your Objective

Knowing your article's objective determines **what you want your readers to know or be able to do**. Be as specific and detailed as possible. If your objective is too general, you'll find it difficult, if not impossible, to present a credible argument or a compelling reason to keep reading. For example:

- **Too General:** Explain the project management changes coming to your department.
- **Specific:** Explain how the new software upgrades will make the data-mining project easier to implement.



Frame your objective in terms of its benefits (as the second example does) rather than its features (as the first example does). If it helps, you can define your objective as a purpose statement, such as: “I want

my document to...” to do what? Answer that question, and you've got a clear objective.

Finally, is your objective interesting, important and/or relevant? Does it entice people to read it? Before you start writing, **have a specific, engaging topic to write about** to encourage others to read it.

Identify Your Readers

Determine who your readers are. If you know them, you can figure out **the best way to help them understand your objective**. You also need to know why they care about your subject matter and decide how they should respond.

Get to know your audience by asking key questions:

- Who wants to know what I have to share?
- Why would they read my writing?
- What problems will it solve?
- How can I best reach this audience?
- What do I want them to do once they read this?

The more specific you can be, the more targeted your writing will be and the more people you'll reach. If readers find your article pertinent, you'll have a better chance of influencing them, even if you're not selling anything.

This “targeted marketing” method of writing not only helps you write more effectively, but also reduces your anxiety about beginning this process. When you **have your audience clearly in your mind**, you can focus on connecting with them. Writing in the second person (that is, writing to “you”) makes this process easier as well.

Determine Your Scope

Clarifying the scope of your writing task directs you to figure out **what kind of information you need to engage your audience**. You also need to determine how much is enough for your readers to understand your objective. Where you begin, what angle to take and how deep you decide to delve into the subject are questions you must answer before you start writing.

You can't answer these questions without knowing your readers. All **good writing starts with knowing what your audience wants**. Keep this in mind as you move on to the next step of the writing process: doing your research.

Step 2: Research

This is the point where you **gather the information necessary to complete your writing task**. The amount of investigation you need to do depends on your article's primary objective, its scope and intended audience. The more complex your topic, the more in-depth the research you need to do.

Writing a business email, for example, may require no more than coming up with a list of related ideas. The hardest part of this small writing project may consist of finding the name and email address of the person to whom you're writing.

Writing something more complex, on the other hand, requires more in-depth research. Before projecting the outcome in a coming election, for instance, you need to do some polling, look at the census and count voter registration numbers. Similarly, writing a blog post about dental fillings takes research into dental procedures and dentist practices.



Authoritative Words

Add credibility to your work by doing research to back up your words. Attribute numbers and facts to their sources. You may even find a direct quote to insert into your

article, especially if it drives home your message.

Include what you already know about the subject. Then research to confirm your knowledge and fill in the holes of what you don't know. Ask questions. Who, what and where? When, how and why? Keep track of your sources and double-check your facts. **Accuracy is mandatory.**

As your research progresses, take notes, but **never plagiarize**. At Ray Access, we do all our research online from reputable sources. We *never* use copied material from a source in a final draft. Plagiarism is stealing, and even if you don't face any legal consequences, search engine algorithms will catch it and punish your article so no one can find it.

Step 3: Organization

To write effectively, you need to touch on the who, what, where, when, why and how of your topic — no matter how detailed or formal you expect to be. **Make your topic relevant to your chosen audience** by closing all the “so-what doors.” The “so-what doors” lead to the “ignore-this-article room.”

Organization helps you **present your research material in a methodical manner**. This is the design phase of your writing task, the step in which you make decisions about how to develop the topic. A well-organized presentation maximizes the likelihood that your readers will understand your objective.

By organizing your ideas before you start writing, you’re able to **build a framework and avoid repetition**. The information should follow a logical pattern. This is where you decide *how* to present the material.

Prioritize Your Thoughts

This process involves **creating a bulleted list**. In other words, start figuring out the specific bits of information you want to include. It depends on how you answer these questions:

- How long will your article be?
- Where will it be published?
- What are the legal ramifications of being wrong?
- What results hang in the balance?

A few **techniques to organize and prioritize your thoughts** include:

- **Brainstorming:** First, list all the ideas you want to include without worrying about order or relevance. (See From Your Mind to Theirs, below.)
- **Organizing:** Group related ideas together to create a hierarchy.
- **Mind Mapping:** Arrange material in subsections from general to specific or from abstract to concrete.
- **Labeling:** Create titles and subheadings for the paragraphs you want to write.

Personalize the Techniques

People have different learning styles and preferred means of communication. **Use whichever technique works best for you.** Draw simple pictures, make charts, graphs or other images; write out words or phrases and draw connections between them to understand how they're related.

Sometimes, to untangle a messy topic, you need to find the end and then work your way back to the beginning. This technique, called “**backward planning,**” is also useful for overcoming writers' block:

- Start with your deadline.
- Decide what has to happen to finish the project.
- Figure out what needs to happen before that, and then before that, and so on until you get to the beginning.



From Your Mind to Theirs

Once you're writing, the transitions from point to point will matter, but right now you want to **address the connection and fluidity between your ideas and thoughts.** Find the

trail that takes you through your task from beginning to end.

Writing begins in the mind of the writer. If your mind keeps drawing blanks, your entire project can screech to a halt. **One way to conquer writer's block is by brainstorming.** Here's one approach:

1. Sit at your computer or writing place; **set a time limit** of 5 to 15 minutes.
2. **Summarize your topic** in a phrase or sentence to get your thoughts flowing.
3. **Write anything** that comes to mind, whether on topic or off, for the period of time you chose.
4. Don't pause, don't rush, but **work quickly.**
5. **Don't review** what you've written until your time is up.
6. When you're done, **re-read what you've written:**
 - Can you find words or ideas you can grab onto for the topic?
 - Is there a flow or sequence to this list of ideas?

- Make up questions and answers about the topic, no matter how strange. For example:
 - Why am I doing this? What do I hope to accomplish?
 - What's interesting about this topic to me?
 - Why do I like this topic? Why don't I like it?
 - What would my friends say about it?

Step 4: The Outline

For this phase, gather up all your organized thoughts — your ideas, phrases and ordered brainstorming — and arrange them into an outline. **An outline is a blueprint** or plan for a written article. It's the script from which your copy develops. Its purpose is to show you where everything will fit in your finished article, website page, blog post or email.

The complexity of your outline depends on the scope of your writing task. Writing an email or blog post might require only a simple list. Web pages or white papers, on the other hand, may need more complex hierarchical structures. **Your outline keeps you on track** while you're writing.

Keep It Simple

Your outline may originate from a simple organizational list — your items in a logical order. A simple list includes the main points you want to make in your writing project. **Its purpose is to remind you of what to write about.** You can use words, phrases or complete sentences in your outline.

If your outlines tend to look the same after a while, that's actually good. **A structural formula can help you format your document.** Becoming familiar with a formula gets you thinking about how best to use important elements, such as:

- **Great headlines** that drive your message
- **A descriptive subhead** after every two or three paragraphs
- **Bullets or numbered lists** when you have groups of items

Eventually, your outlines may reside solely in your head, but make no mistake: they always exist. **Every writing project requires an outline.**

Writing from the Outline

Your outline often consists of sentence fragments. Take each one and turn it into a complete sentence. Turn main headings into topic sentences, and subheadings into supporting sentences. The details from **your research notes fill in the body** of your text.

Always mention what's in it for your readers. A cornerstone of effective online writing is to **describe benefits, not features** — the “Why should I care?” aspect of good writing. If your writing is effective enough and if you support your assertions, your article will generate responses. To accomplish this goal, give your readers something specific to do, a call to action. (See Final Notes for more about calls to action.)

Step 5: A First Draft

Non-writers often balk at this phase. But if you've done the previous four steps sufficiently, **you're ready to write your first draft.** Writing does not have to be as difficult as you imagine. Remember: you have an outline. All you have to do now is fill in the details.

Here are a few things to **keep in mind** as you face the keyboard:

- A rough draft is not a finished document.
- No one but you ever has to see your first draft.
- Just write.
- Begin writing wherever you feel most comfortable.
- Don't worry about grammar, word usage and punctuation as you write.
- Just write.
- A rough draft is *supposed* to be rough.
- Don't worry about fragments, run-on sentences or transitions.
- Just write.
- Don't worry about beginnings, middles and endings.
- Just write.

Just get your ideas on the page, consulting your outline as you type. Keep moving forward; don't get stuck on any one section, paragraph, sentence or word. No matter what you're writing, it's not finished until after the Review and Revision phase.

Writing and Writing for the Web

There are differences between writing for the web and writing for other media. For example, readers of online writing don't often stop to read. When it's online, **readers skim through content**, looking for what interests them. So make it easy for your readers. Give them the "bottom line" and the "so what" right away. Tell them how to respond. They'll thank you for making it so clear.

Here are a few more specific notes to help you understand **how to write for Internet readers**:



Be Concise and Direct

At a time when information is so important to business, fewer and fewer people actually read. So be concise and to the point. **Make your words count**. Use as many words as you need,

but not one word more.

Even as long-form content returns to the Internet, every word you write and **each one of your sentences must provide value**. Content that's stuffed with keywords to satisfy SEO is just as useless as a 50-word legal document.

To make your article easier to read, **keep your sentences short**. Present one idea at a time. Paragraphs, too, should be short, containing no more than three sentences.

Find Your Voice

Maintain a professional tone in your business writing, but if it's *too* formal, you'll lose your voice. A personality differentiates your writing. So **try for a style between the two extremes of formal and casual**. But stay away from off-color jokes, gossip and personal opinions that could offend someone.



Be so clear that there's no chance someone will misunderstand you or your intentions. **Never sacrifice clarity** in your attempt at humor or informality. One way to make sure you stay clear is to use the *active voice*.

- **Active Voice:**

In an active sentence, **the subject does the action**. A straightforward example is the sentence: "John loves Judy." John is the subject, and he is doing the action: loving Judy, the object of the sentence.

- **Passive Voice:**

In passive writing, it becomes: "Judy is loved by John," which is not nearly as powerful or immediate. **Passive sentences can be vague and awkward**, which is why politicians use them so much. "Mistakes were made," "Bombs were dropped" and "Shots were fired" leave out the subject, making the actions blameless.

Step 6: Review and Revision

Editing is where the real magic happens in the writing process. And this is what makes Ray Access so successful — that second pair of eyes and those few extra reads make all the difference in the effectiveness of the writing. We live by the motto: **Write once; check twice**.

Proofread immediately after you write to find the simple typos. Then set it aside. **Review your article again hours or even days later**. Putting some time between writing and reviewing allows you to catch errors of tone that might lead to misunderstandings. For example, when you're upset or angry, you may write things that just come out the wrong way.

It's not fair — typos happen — but people judge you for those mistakes, sometimes harshly. Except in an emergency, always give yourself time before your edit. Or find an impartial editor to review your work. **Make sure your work says what you want it to say and how you want it to say it** before letting your audience read it.

Editing Tips

There are actually **three types of editing**, from most intensive to least:

1. **Developmental editing**, where an editor helps you develop the outline and work out the big issues in achieving your goals.
2. **Copy editing**, where an editor reviews your article line-by-line to tighten your writing, eliminate redundancy and improve the flow of information.
3. **Proofreading**, where an editor gives the article one last read to catch typos, grammar mistakes and the like.

This ebook discusses just the last two types of editing: copyediting (or revising) and proofreading (or reviewing). While a professional editor can save you from the embarrassment of careless mistakes, you can still **tighten your writing to make it flow** better. Consider these tips:

- **Cut, cut, cut.** You're not writing to please yourself; you're writing to communicate to others. Get rid of any word, phrase or sentence that doesn't contribute, no matter how clever it is.
- **Revise the opening.** Start your article however you like to get going, but when you're done, revisit the beginning to revise, delete and reshape. Your opening must set expectations and lead readers into the article.
- **Take out redundancies** like "perfectly clear," "personal opinion" and "collect together." Look for sentences that reiterate the same point and delete them.
- **Dump trite business phrases** (such as, "pursuant to your request") and clichés (such as "tried and true" or "good as gold").
- **Avoid outdated expressions.** Leave out: "attached herewith," "this is to advise you" and "as per your request."
- **Leave out the buzzwords** and acronyms. They are lazy and ineffectual.
- **Tighten your writing** by simplifying compound prepositions. For example, "at such time" becomes "when." And "due to the fact that" becomes "because."
- **Keep your writing simple** and conversational, yet professional and authoritative. Find your voice and stick with it.
- **Maintain the same tense** throughout. The present tense makes your writing more immediate, but the simple past tense is most common and easier to read.



Simple But Not Straightforward

Writing can be messy, frustrating and, at times, difficult. The more you write, the better you get, but **you can learn better writing skills from a good editor.**

Here are more writing tips:

- **Adopt a “you attitude.”** Look at a topic from your readers’ point of view. Emphasize what they need to know.
- **Focus on your topic;** make sure you answer questions as they arise.
- **Cut unnecessary words** and phrases. Get to the point.
- **Don’t forget your manners.** “Please” and “thank you” are especially important in short communiqués like emails.

Proofreading

You can always find one more little problem to fix, one more superfluous word to remove or one more tiny typo to expose, but you eventually have to say, “Stop!” Here are a few **tips to get you through the copyediting phase** that can really delay you:

- Give it a rest. **Set your writing aside** for a few hours (or days) after you’ve finished composing. Proofread it with fresh eyes.
- Read through your article, **looking for one type of problem at a time.** Concentrate first on sentence structure, then spelling, then word choice and punctuation.
- **Double-check facts,** figures and proper names. Don’t get caught with a careless mistake.
- **Print out your article** and review it line by line. On paper, you may find errors you missed on the screen. Use a red pen to make rewriting easier.
- **Read your article out loud.** Your ear can catch problems your eye can’t see. Ask a colleague to read it to you. You’ll uncover that inaccurate verb, for example, or a missing word.
- Use a **spellchecker and grammar checker.** They’re not foolproof, but they do help.
- **Create your own personalized proofreading checklist** that includes the types of mistakes you make most often.
- **Ask for help.** Find someone you trust — such as a teacher in your family or a writer on your team — and ask for feedback. Don’t be afraid; their feedback will make your writing better.

Final Notes

Most business communication is meant to achieve a purpose. So make sure your articles, website content and blog posts **include a call to action** — something you want the readers to do. When you add a sense of urgency, readers feel compelled to do it right away. Don't leave it to your readers to decide what to do with the information you've given them — most won't bother and others may get it wrong.

Disperse your call-to-action sentences — such as “Contact us” or “Sign up for our services” — throughout your article. You can also put them at the end, depending on the length of your article. Questions? [Contact Ray Access](#) and we'll respond with answers.



Don't give readers too many choices. At most, provide two options and ask them to pick one. If you're selling something, for example, ask them to choose either a single purchase or added savings on a purchase of two or more.

(Groupon has had great success with this model.) Too many choices often lead to decision paralysis, not to your desired result.

If you still feel stuck or prefer to stick to what you know and do best, the writers and editors at Ray Access can do the writing for you. See our website at rayaccess.com for more information.

About the Authors

Linda Ray and Mark H. Bloom form a complementary partnership. Linda was a journalist for many years, and Mark was a professional editor and technical writer. As a team, they balance each other out, contributing equally to the results. That's because they both read every blog post, website page, press release and article produced under the Ray Access banner.



Linda Ray

Linda Ray is an **award-winning journalist** who brings a wide range of experience to the table. She can turn complicated topics into fresh, readable copy anyone can understand. Linda worked as a staff member on local newspapers and business publications. She's been on the receiving end of press releases and pumped them out for a few years when she was a state work. As a small business owner, Linda knows the territory and eagerly translates her forte for salesmanship into a product you'll appreciate.



Mark Bloom

Mark H. Bloom is an **award-winning technical writer** and professional editor who has successfully transitioned into writing for the web. His past work has instilled in him an insatiable curiosity that he employs in his research. Mark worked for a publishing house, a business journal and a website development firm. He understands the purpose of writing online content, and he delivers targeted copy to attract your audience and convert your visitors.

