

Smart Writing!

Presented by

SwanShadow
COMMUNICATIONS

Volume 2, Issue 2

April 2003

I'm Stuck! Now What?

Everyone who writes has experienced it—that agonizing feeling that comes while staring at a blank sheet of paper or monitor screen, waiting for the right words to appear. It's called **writer's block**. How do you beat it?

I'll share a few tips that usually work for me. Perhaps one or more of these ideas will help you, too.

1. **Variety.** Having more than one writing project to choose from sometimes helps get the wheels turning. If you're struggling to get one project moving, turn to something else for a while. Even if the job you tackle first is a

lower priority, a half-hour with it might freshen your mind for the more critical task.

2. **Flex your fingers.** Often it's useful to simply sit down and start typing, even if you're just banging out random thoughts and phrases, lyrics to your favorite song, or the roster of your favorite baseball team. If you're finding it difficult to do even this, open a magazine or newspaper and start copying the first thing you read.
3. **Aim lower.** That first sentence of a letter or article can seem intimidating. If there's

another section later in the document you could start, try writing that part first.

4. **Get over it.** Maybe you're too concerned about how the piece is going to turn out. Worry about the finished product once you've actually got some product in front of you to worry about. Just let yourself address the subject in your own words, without focusing on style or organization. Even if you throw all this work away later, you might dislodge the mental logjam.

— Michael Rankins

Heads Up!

Newspapers use **headlines** to draw the reader's eye to each story. A good headline doesn't merely announce the article — it convinces us to *read on*.

The shorter the headline is, the greater its impact. A one-word headline can be powerful, if it's the right

word: "War!" "Tornado!" "Rescued!" You already want to know what these stories report, don't you? Two words are more effective than three, and so on.

Second, headline words must be vivid, active, compelling. The fewer words you use, the more impor-

tant each word becomes.

You're thinking, "But I don't write newspaper articles!" Try inserting a **strong headline** at the beginning of your next business letter, or in the "subject" field of your next e-mail. Grab your readers' focus, and *you've got 'em!*

Is That Write?

Is it "affect" or "effect"?

Affect is a **verb** meaning *influence* or *alter*: "Hoover Dam **affects** (*influences*) the flow of the Colorado River." **Effect**, used as a **verb**, means *cause* or *make happen*: "The 19th Amendment **effected** (*caused*) a change in voting rights." **Effect** can also be a **noun** meaning *result*: "What was the **effect** (result) of your proposal?" **Affect** is rarely used as a noun, except by mental health professionals.

That friend of writers everywhere, **Liquid Paper**, was invented in 1956 by **Bette Nesmith Graham**, a Dallas secretary (and mother of future Monkee **Mike Nesmith**).



Suggestions for an upcoming issue?

Share them!

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SwanShadow Communications.

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Writers Say...

"The only thing I was fit for was to be a writer, and this notion rested solely on my suspicion that I would never be fit for real work, and that writing didn't require any." — Russell Baker

Three Questions to Ask AFTER You Write

Last issue, we presented three things you should do **before** writing: **make a list** of the ideas you need to communicate, **prioritize** these points in order of their importance, and develop a rough **outline**.

After the writing is done, ask yourself these **three questions** before you consider your work complete.

1. IS IT CLEAR?

Does what you've written say what you wanted to say? Did you get all of the key information *out of your head*—or better yet, out of your outline—and *onto the paper* (or screen, if you're composing on a computer)? Have you

anticipated in your text all of the reader's likely questions?

Remember, you know what you're talking about, but your audience knows only as much as you tell them. Don't assume your reader understands you unless you *make yourself understood*.

2. IS IT CLEAN?

Clean implies *free from errors*: typographical, spelling, grammatical, factual. But I also mean "cleanliness" of language.

Have you edited out any *unnecessary words or phrases*? Business writers sometimes develop the "corporation speech" habit, with its char-

acteristic verbosity. If a sentence begins with "I would like to point out that..." or "Please be advised that..." or any other overly formal and needless catchphrases, cut the excess words.

3. DOES IT SOUND LIKE ME?

Read aloud what you've written. *Is it uncomfortable to read?* Do you find yourself losing your place, becoming easily confused, or pausing frequently in midsentence to gasp for air? Imagine how your reader will feel wading through this!

The more closely your writing "voice" mimics your

natural speech pattern, the more effective your written communication will be. Adopting a style you find awkward only complicates matters. If what you've written sounds as though someone else wrote it, *loosen up*. Try an approach that's less artificial and more "you."

Communication is relationship. It's you relating with your audience in a way that helps them comprehend what you say, give credence to your point of view, and react positively to your message. **Clear, clean, personal writing** builds relationships. Try it!

— Michael Rankins