Improve your Writing Skills

guidance notes for students

Roy Johnson

Clifton Press

Clifton Press

First published
Clifton Press
Manchester 2012

First digital edition
Mantex 2012

ISBN 0951984454

Typesetting and design by Studio Social

www.studiosocial.co.uk

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About the author

Roy Johnson was educated at Stockport School, Cheshire. After starting his career as an industrial designer, he returned to education and graduated as a mature student in literary studies from Manchester University, where he was awarded a Phd for his study of the relationship between literature and politics. He has taught at Manchester University, the Open University, and was formerly a tutor in literary studies with the Workers Educational Association. His publications include — *Studying Literature* (1986), *Return to Study* (1987), (with Bill Jones) *Making the Grade* (1990), *Studying Fiction* (1991), *Writing Essays* (1991) *Revision and Examinations* (1993), *Marking Essays* (1993), *Study Skills* (1994), and *Electronic Writing* (1996). He is the director of Clifton Press and webmaster at Mantex Information Design (www.mantex.co.uk), which produces educational software and online learning programs.

Acknowledgements

Many of the shorter items quoted and discussed in this book come from the work of former students. My thanks go to them - particularly those from the *New Horizons* course which I taught together with my colleague Bill Jones for many years. The intensive work of writing [and marking!] weekly essay assignments throws up illustrations of the many difficulties people encounter when trying to improve their writing skills.

Of the specific individuals who have helped me with this book, I am grateful to Mike Sharples for his support and the generous manner in which he has shared his research and experience on writing strategies. James Hartley too has allowed me to quote from his work in this field of enquiry, as well as his writing on instructional text. It is interesting that these generous acts of co-operation have been made entirely by electronic mail. I have never met any of the people mentioned in person: we have merely bumped into each other in the busier corridors of the Internet.

For passages dealing with the philosophy of writing and the use of computers, I am happy to acknowledge the influence of Jay Bolter's work. At a more personal level, Heather Pollitt has generously shared ideas on the practice of writing over the polished surface of her dining table. She has also acted as a particularly rigorous supplement to a grammar-checker.

Ian (Jack) Dempsey has been patient and supportive in helping me through practical lessons in tele-navigation, and the same can be said of Robin Hobbes to whom I owe special thanks for sharing some of his Internet humiliations.

I would like to thank Barry Thompson for permission to use a piece of his undergraduate work as an example, and at the same to acknowledge the fact that I have drawn on some of the teaching materials created during collaborative work with the late Pat Barnett.

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Structure

The contents of this book are arranged with the smaller details of writing presented first: more general and complex issues are discussed later. We start however with the purpose and the audience for a piece writing — two very important features frequently neglected by writers. Then there begins the gradual progression from the simplest elements of writing to the more sophisticated issues of producing good style and structure. Towards the end of the book there are sections dealing with the use of computers and the latest form of written communication, which I have called 'electronic writing'. Finally, there are three sections dealing with common problems and mistakes.

As I hope its title makes clear, this book is for those who already possess *some* writing skills, but who wish to improve them. It does not seek to offer elementary instruction for those just beginning to develop their skills — although the basic guidelines for producing clear, comprehensible writing are the same for everyone. Similarly, it does not pretend to cover the most subtle and advanced features of written communication. These are the province of linguistics, textbooks on grammar, and the work-benches of imaginative writing.

No grammar

The guidance offered should be suitable for a variety of readers. It is designed to help those people who have always had problems expressing themselves on paper, or those who left school some time ago and have not practised writing since. It should assist people who wish to advance in their jobs and who feel that their writing skills need attention. It should also be useful to students who wish to improve this part of their study skills, and I hope it will offer guidance on efficient forms of communication to anyone in commerce and public life.

There are many books on writing skills which explore the complexities of grammar and the close analysis of prose in far more detail than we shall cover here. However, in my experience many people find these books too advanced. They often go into details of 'prepositional verbs' and 'fused participles', which is probably not what the majority of readers require. When facing writing tasks, most people simply need clarification of the

basic rules. They want advice on how to make improvements and avoid mistakes, and they need guidance on what constitutes good practice. What they *don't* want is grammatical analysis and explanations — and in fact this should not really be necessary. I doubt very much whether most Olympic athletes know the names of all the muscles in their bodies: they simply know how to use them to good effect. The same is true of many successful writers and the rules of grammar.

Many experienced authors don't know the linguistic and grammatical rules of what they produce. The vast majority of them will generate fluent prose without knowing the difference between a genitive and a gerund. But they will sense if something is grammatically right or wrong. They will feel from their reading experience or their sensitivity to language what constitutes a good or a bad sentence.

Practice

However, this should not be taken as a signal for complacence. There is no escaping the fact that improving your writing skills will involve some work. Writing is a craft (at its best, an art) which has to be practised. But many people should be able to make *immediate* improvements to their writing if they follow some of the advice offered here. This can be something as simple as just making preparatory notes on what you wish to say, and being prepared to check and edit the writing you produce. There might be extra effort required, but the results will almost certainly be encouraging.

It is very common for people to feel (quite appropriately) that they reveal themselves personally in what they write. They fear that any mistakes they make will create a bad impression, and that a piece of writing will somehow make a public declaration by which they might be judged. This is largely true of most writing which passes into the public domain — business letters, reports, circulars, official proposals, journalism, and fiction. It is for this reason that a great deal of emphasis is placed here on pursuing clarity, simplicity, and accuracy as worthwhile goals in the first instance. The personal flourishes and elements of stylish prose can be generated later.

Most people seeking to develop their writing skills will probably be quite happy simply to write in a clear, plain manner without falling into any of the linguistic and grammatical traps which they feel are waiting for them. This book should help you to do just that. A few others however may seek the polish and flair of 'creative writing'. For those who are serious in such ambition, this book can offer only a clarification of basics. The inspiration and originality will have to be found elsewhere. [Indeed, there are many who argue that creative writing cannot be taught at all, but can only be encouraged.]

Guidance

There would be nothing wrong with reading straight through this book from start to finish. I suspect however that many people will be looking for guidance on one or two particular parts of their writing skills, and from these points may wish to move on elsewhere. For this reason there is a fairly extensive system of cross-referencing. Advice on syntax may be linked to sentence construction for instance, then from sentences back to grammar. These trails may be followed through all the materials if required. [This is a device picked up from developments in computer technology and is called Hypertext.]

You will discover that there is a certain degree of overlap and repetition in some of the points of advice. This has been quite deliberately planned to avoid sending readers scurrying backwards and forwards between sections. For instance, guidance on introductions and conclusions is dealt with fully under **Structure**, but briefer versions of these notes also appear in the section on **Essay writing**.

I have tried to consider a wide variety of writing — from personal correspondence, through essays and report writing, to other forms of public communication. However, my personal background is in academic writing, and many of the examples used are drawn from this field. I hope those from other cultural realms will be tolerant. If it is any compensation, I can offer them the reassurance that whilst the world of education has many shortcomings, it is frequently concerned with the close analysis of writing and its effectiveness — especially in my own subject of literary studies.

Plain style

Each of the various forms of writing has its own conventions. A style of writing which may be appropriate in a letter to a close friend will not be suitable in a business letter or an official report. Rather than try to describe each of these conventions however, I have aimed at plain, clear prose as an objective. Those able to produce it should then have the control to adopt the style required by their particular writing task.

Like many books of instruction written these days, this one has been influenced by word-processors and computer technology. I have adopted the form of short, discrete sections to make the explanation of each separate issue easier. This is also done to facilitate recall of topics for those using the book as a source of reference. The use of brief numbered paragraphs in page layout is an attempt to focus attention on one topic at any given time.

Rather than give long explanations of grammatical niceties (which tends to deter many writers seeking advice) I have chosen instead to give examples of good and bad writing. This is based on the supposition that most people wish to improve their writing by following practical examples, rather than by trying to learn and follow a set of linguistic rules. However, in the case of punctuation I have given brief explanations of the basic elements, and examples of good practice. In my experience this is one feature of writing which many people are not sure about, but which is quite easily clarified.

I thought it would be useful to make a distinction between remarks which explain or amplify a point made in the notes, and personal observations which I decided not to resist making. For this reason, the first of these are in curved brackets (like this) and the second in square brackets [which I hope you won't find too intrusive].

Use a dictionary

At certain points throughout the notes, you will come across words whose meaning you may need to look up in a dictionary. Don't imagine that I am ignoring my own advice on consistency of tone at these junctures. The words are placed there deliberately as an incentive for those who wish to develop their vocabulary. They are a hint that you should get into the habit of using a good dictionary as a source of reference.

At the risk of repeating myself, and without wishing to make the whole process sound facile, I would like to assure readers that most people can bring about immediate and dramatic improvements to their writing with just a little effort. After teaching for a quarter of a century, I am still positively struck by the example of students who can improve a paragraph and bring it to life after only a few minutes spent considering the merits of redrafting and editing.

Finally, if any readers wish to make suggestions for additions and improvements to these notes, I would like to invite them to pass on their recommendations. Recent developments in computers and printing technology make it possible to issue new editions of books far more frequently than was possible in the past. For this reason I will be pleased to incorporate any new material into future editions — with full acknowledgement of course.

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Roy Johnson Manchester 2012

1 Audience, form, and function

Audience, form, and function

Don't be deterred by the section title. This is a phrase which comes from the academic study of language and the way it is used. *Audience* simply means the person or people who will read your writing; *form* means the shape or the layout of what you write; and *function* means what it is intended for, or what is its purpose. These are three very important aspects of writing which many people don't really think about when they are sitting down to write.

The reason for dealing with them here, and dealing with them separately, is quite simple. The more you can become conscious of these aspects of writing, the more control you will have over what you write, and the more effectively you will develop your writing skills. You could have perfect spelling, grammar, and syntax yet still produce writing which was ineffective. There may be no technical errors in your work, but it may not achieve its purpose if it is not properly aimed at your audience. If it is cast in the wrong form, it may not fulfil its proper function.

Take control

You might note that decisions concerning each of these three features precede the act of writing itself. Before even putting down a single word, you should be able to say who the writing is intended for, what sort of writing it is, and what is the purpose of your act of communication. For instance if you were writing to a close friend, you would know the audience very well. The form of your writing would be the personal letter, and the purpose of it may be to transmit information, to gossip, to entertain — or all these things simultaneously.

Learning to take each of these features into account will not require vast amounts of study or effort on your part. All you need to do is read through these notes and get into the habit of thinking about the issues involved. You should acquaint yourself with the forms which are appropriate to your own writing tasks, and keep the features in mind as a sort of mental checklist whilst you are writing.

Audience

The audience for a piece of writing is the person or people who will eventually read it. If you are sending a postcard to a friend, you know the audience personally and can therefore be casual, make jokes, and refer to things which nobody else would understand. If on the other hand you are writing to an institution (say, applying for a mortgage) you probably wouldn't know anybody in the building society, and you wouldn't know who was going to read your letter. A more formal manner would be appropriate in these circumstances.

If you were writing to a child, it would make sense to keep the vocabulary simple so that the child would understand what you had to say. However, if you were writing an application to the European Commission for project funding, you might need to use the special terminology [I am being polite] which is often required by such institutions. If you were writing an intimate diary, you yourself would be the audience. In this case you could say anything you wish in whatever manner you prefer. [It is noticeable that many people use private systems of abbreviations in their diaries.]

Choose your style

Those are easy examples, but sometimes the issue is more complex. Imagine you were writing an article of topical interest for a local newspaper. Should you write in a very formal manner, with the editor in mind, hoping he will use more of your articles? Should you write in a personal manner, trying to amuse your friends, who usually like your jokes? Or should you strike a balance for general readers, few of whom you will know? This is a more difficult case, because you have a number of potential audiences in mind. The answer is likely to be determined by the 'house style' of the newspaper. If the issue were serious, a formal style might be required, whereas something more relaxed might be permitted for a lighthearted topic.

An even more difficult case occurs in academic essay writing, where students have to produce responses to questions set by their tutors. 'What is the nature of the relationship between Mr Verloc and Inspector Heat in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent?*' The tutor already knows the answer

to such questions — so who is the student writing for? The answer usually given to this question is 'Imagine you are writing for an intelligent and reasonably well-informed but non-specialist peer'. You can assume some knowledge of the subject, but not a lot. Yet nobody else but the tutor is going to read the essay. The audience in this case is an imaginary reader.

Remember the reader

Just as many people do not seem to keep in mind their *purpose* when writing, they often appear to ignore the *audience.* It is quite common to find people writing in a similar manner to both a close friend and to a government department. They probably have just one style of writing, which they use for all purposes. There is nothing absolutely wrong with that of course, but the manner is likely to be inappropriate for at least one of these audiences. Too much informality will not look good if you are applying for a job with the Inland Revenue. On the other hand phrases such as 'Thank you for your letter of the 15th ...' would be out of place in a letter to a friend.

Of course, keeping your audience in mind when writing does require some thought — and it imposes one extra burden. In addition to wondering 'What shall I say?' you also have to keep in mind 'Will this be understood?' and 'Is it pitched at the appropriate level?' This is all extra work, and it is not altogether surprising that many people just get down whatever words they can manage and leave it at that.

However, keeping the audience in mind is a powerful means of increasing the effectiveness of your writing. It offers a chance to make the act of communication far more successful than it otherwise might have been. Striking the right note or creating the most appropriate tone for your audience will give readers confidence in what you have to say. If you can be friendly without being patronising, they will probably enjoy your writing and will want to read more. If you can be serious and informative without being too stiff, they may be persuaded by your arguments.

What follows is a brief extract from a communication issued by the Inland Revenue. It is intended to clarify a point on personal taxation, and is therefore aimed at the general public. It may have been written with accuracy in mind, but I doubt if the audience was being considered.

> *The basis of assessment for Schedule D Case I and II, other than commencement and cessation, is what is termed a previous year basis.*

Be honest — could you understand that, first time through? This is both bad manners and poor communication. It is aimed at the ordinary people, but is choked by an officialese which few readers will be able to understand. Some government agencies have recently been put under pressure to clarify their public documents, and some have taken steps to redesign forms and write in plain English; but there is still a long way to go.

Here is a similar example taken from the world of education. A teacher working in a school wishes to explain the basic principles of algebra to students who are in a non-academic, low ability group. To do this she writes a worksheet setting out her explanation in what she thinks are simple terms.

> Algebra is a system of working with numbers and quantities, using letters, without having to know precise values. Exact values of functions can be found at any suitable time by substituting number values for letters. The Rules of Number apply in exactly the same way, but there are a few differences in how you *write* algebra. There is no **place value** in letters — instead *ab = a x b,* in either order [Rem: 12 = 10 + 2].

These statements may all be technically correct — but what is a young, low-ability learner going to make of expressions such as *Exact values of functions* and *place value?* The teacher has not taken the trouble to put herself in the position of members of her class — her audience. These negative examples should demonstrate the importance of keeping your readers in mind.

Multiple audiences

There can be instances where there is one apparent audience, but also another which may be unacknowledged, or of which the writer may even be unconscious. Many pieces of pompous, over-inflated writing are produced by writers whose ostensible purpose is to communicate a message, but who also wish to 'impress' other possible readers. They may only be circulating the minutes of a meeting, but they inflate the language hoping to make a good impression on the boss.

Another example of this phenomenon comes from the academic world. Tutors often write teaching materials ostensibly for a student audience, but with their academic reputation in mind, they try to impress their fellow tutors. The result is often writing which is too advanced for the students. [Some Open University distance learning materials suffer in this way.]

The more difficult cases are those in which you are not sure who the members of your audience will be. Imagine you were writing a brochure advertising some public event to which you wanted to attract the widest possible audience. At what level should you pitch your style and tone? What assumptions can you make about the literacy and the sophistication of your potential readers? Well, you will have to use some common sense and some guesswork. Without going into the details of reading ages and vocabulary acquisition, you would do well to use plain, simple straightforward language, with an absolute minimum of complexity.

Choose your terms

If on the other hand you were writing a technical brochure illustrating the benefits of a new model of car, your probable audience is more specialised. You could reasonably assume that the person reading it would have some knowledge of terms such as *horsepower, fuel injection,* and *acceleration.* In fact your brochure might start with a description of the car's new features in non-technical language for the general reader. Then in a separate section you could include the specialised information for those who were interested.

Imagine that you wanted to write an illustrated children's book on dinosaurs for instance. This is a popular subject: it might sell well. But you would not start off in this manner: *Dinosauria were the dominant land animals of the Mesozoic era, forming two orders of reptiles related to the crocodilians and the ancestors of the birds.* The sentence is too long, and the vocabulary is too sophisticated for young children (even though the statement is true). What you might have written more appropriately is as follows: *There were many kinds of dinosaur. They lived long before the first human beings. Some were quite small and moved quickly. Others were big and moved slowly. The dinosaurs in this picture were 47 feet long.* You have your audience in mind. You are taking into account what children can understand.

There is no getting away from the fact that all this adds another task to that of getting words onto the page. But making the effort of regularly checking that you are taking the audience into consideration will improve the effectiveness of what you write. Keep asking yourself 'Will people understand this? Do I need to explain these terms? Can I assume that a typical reader will already know these matters?'

Good manners

A brief word on good manners in writing. You should be very careful about using acronyms in documents for general circulation. (These are the shortened names formed from the first letters of a title: BBC, NATO, and EEC for example.) Just because you are used to talking about PSBs, FTEs, the IRT, and NIACE with your colleagues, don't imagine that everybody else is familiar with these terms. Have the good manners to explain them. You should give the name *in full* the first time you use it, followed by the acronym which will be used thereafter. 'The National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) today issued a policy statement ...'. Obviously if your document is for communicating with colleagues, you might assume that they have a knowledge of these acronyms comparable with your own. But keep any additional possible audience in mind, don't assume too much, and err on the side of giving a full explanation in the first instance.

In his academic study, *The Psychology of Writing,* Ronald Kellogg makes the interesting point that concern for the audience might be left as a separate consideration, to be taken into account after the basic drafting has been done (though he admits that there is also evidence to the contrary):

> attending to the audience while drafting has been shown to yield poorer-quality texts than waiting until revision. While drafting, the writer gains a personal voice without worrying to excess about the reader's reaction. It must be added, though, that Rafoth (1988) observed both good and poor writers among college freshmen delaying their concern with audience until [the] revision [stage].

This might be one way of reducing the intellectual burden of the writing task. You can write the first drafts 'in your own words', then convert your results at a later stage.

Form

The term 'form' here means the shape, layout, or the arrangement of parts in a piece of writing. It is a term which is used to describe the way in which the writing is organised. For instance, a novel usually has chapters. Most traditional poems have verses. A business letter normally bears both the sender's and the recipient's address. A dictionary has its entries laid out alphabetically. An encyclopedia does too, and it will also contain an index. Official reports are often divided into separate sections. The instructions for assembling a model aeroplane will normally be short numbered paragraphs. Most academic essays are continuous prose arguments 1500-2000 words long.

Good form

Each one of these examples illustrates the point that there is normally a given form for a piece of writing. Just as it is important to keep both the audience and purpose in mind whilst you are writing, it is equally important that you are aware of the conventions of form. For most types of public writing, it is important that you adhere to these conventions. It would be no use producing a piece of writing in one form (say, as a personal letter) when another form was called for (an official report).

The form of a piece of writing is normally determined by practical considerations. For instance, think of a short pamphlet which describes benefits available to people who are unemployed. The allowances are described individually, and then summarised as a list on the last page. The essence of such a list is that it presents a brief digest of what people might claim. The earlier descriptions will be reduced to single-sentence statements. This is an attempt to make the items clear to the reader. If the statements go on too long, they will lose their impact and effect.

Similarly, a set of instructions for wiring an electrical plug would normally be set out as a numbered list — usually with diagrams [an important feature in this case]. The reader should follow the sequence of the instructions, partly to arrange the wiring correctly, partly for the sake of safety. Imagine how much more difficult such instructions would be to follow if they were set out in continuous prose writing, like a novel.

A short encyclopedia entry offers an interesting case of form. The section describing a small animal for instance would give bare details of its appearance, behaviour, and natural habitat. There might be a note on its place in the categorisation of animal life and its environmental significance, but there is no room for lengthy descriptions. Everything must becompressed into the smallest space possible. This is one reason why a picture would be used in such a case.

If you are not sure about the form your piece of writing must take, the sensible thing to do is look at other examples of good practice. Try to locate illustrations of similar kinds of writing, and use them as a model. If this is not possible for some reason, then cast your writing in a simple clear form. Nobody is likely to object to short, clear paragraphs in a business letter, or to numbered sections in a report.

Form switching

Many clever writers have made entertaining and imaginative use of the conventions by producing work in one form which normally belongs in another. Novelists have traditionally exploited this possibility. Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker* and Laclos's *Les liaisons dangereuses* are novels written in the form of an exchange of letters [the epistolary novel]. Alexander Pushkin and Vikram Seth have produced novels in verse form [*Eugene Onegin* and *The Golden Gate* respectively]. Similarly, Private Eye had a regular satirical feature called *The Secret Diary of John Major aged 47¾* (based on Sue Townsend's *Adrian Mole* series) in which the Prime Minister's affairs of state are discussed in the form of a schoolboy's diary.

Function

When we put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard) we have a purpose — even if it is just to amuse ourselves. But that purpose could be to inform, persuade, entertain, or to instruct. We could be filling in a form, writing a postcard to a friend, or applying for a job. The range of possible purposes is very wide — and this presents one of the first hidden problems which people face when they come to write. There are different types of writing suitable for different purposes.

The way we write a casual letter to a friend would not be suitable for a job application. Similarly, the abbreviated notes we might jot in a private diary would not be appropriate in a company report.

Many people, having learned to write in just one way during their school-days, go on using the same style (with perhaps some minor variations) throughout the rest of their lives. They adopt the same approach, no matter what their writing purpose. It is for this reason that some people suspect that they are not quite 'getting it right' or not 'striking the right note' even though they cannot think of an alternative manner. They are using this fixed manner when it might not be appropriate.

Many people also lose the habit of writing after they leave school. Those who go into occupations which do not include writing as a part of their work may find that the skill becomes rusty with neglect. Writing is a craft (some would say an art) and the skills involved need to be practised regularly in order to keep them in good order.

The purpose of a piece of writing, the style in which it is written, and its intended audience are all very subtly related. If any one of these three elements is badly judged or inappropriate, then the value of your communication may be undermined. In the worst cases, someone may not take your writing seriously. The more conscious you are of these features,the more chance you have of making your writing effective. And you might note that only one of them — the style — is actually connected to the writing itself. The other two reside outside it.

Let's look at a couple of examples to illustrate the point. First of all, imagine that you found the following note on someone's doorstep.

> Dear Sir, further to our recent discussion regarding my product requirements, I would be obliged if on the occasion of tomorrow, Wednesday 7 July, you would deliver two separate pint bottles of your 'Cream Top' unskimmed pasteurised dairy milk, instead of my customary order for only one. Thanking you in anticipation, I remain, Yours sincerely, Mrs Agnes Fingerbottom.

It's not badly written. It's not even ungrammatical. But is it appropriate for its purpose? Well, obviously not. *Two pints please* would have been enough. We don't write in this formal manner when leaving a note for the milkman. Mrs Fingerbottom has not kept the purpose of the writing in mind, and she has employed a written style which belongs to the realm of the formal business letter.

Here's another example — taken from an imaginary cookery book, with instructions for baking a cake.

> Allow the beautifully soft flour, of a delicate off-white colour, to trickle lovingly through the sieve onto the eagerly expectant little pats of bright yellow butter nestling together in the bottom of the bowl below.

Once again, the writer has not kept the purpose in mind. What we expect from cooking instructions is *clarity* and *brevity,* not a lot of adjectival trimmings and intrusive anthropomorphism [I'll leave you to look up that one].

Clarity wins

So, the purpose of the writing task can have a great deal of influence on the manner of expression which will be most appropriate. This will be especially true of any form of writing in which you might be attempting to inform or influence other people. Just think how quickly we become irritated or bored by advertising copy which does not get to the point, or which makes assumptions about us which we resent.

Obviously, you should take your readership into account. If you know that you are writing for a literate, intelligent audience which has a knowledge of the subject comparable to your own, then there is probably little need to exercise restraint. But if there is any doubt, or if you do not know who your readers will be, then err on the side of caution. Remember that in purely numerical terms, more people will be able to understand what you have to say if you say it clearly.

Journalists in particular are trained to recognise that if the purpose of their job is to bring information and news to readers, they must do so by getting to the point straight away. Their rule of thumb is to keep in mind the following questions: *Who? What? Where? When?* and *Why?*. In other words, they should get to the essence of their story by asking these fundamental questions of it. Who was involved? What actually happened? Where did it happen? When did the incident take place? And why did it happen? They might then produce an opening paragraph on prescription charge increases like this:

> Prescription charges will go up by 20p an item to £2.20 from April 1, Mr Barney Heyhoe, the Health Minister, announced yesterday. The latest rise means that they have gone up by over 1,000 per cent since 1979 when a prescription cost 20p.
> (*The* **Guardian**)

2 Generating ideas

Generating ideas

Some writing tasks will require you to come up with ideas or generate responses to a given topic. Students writing coursework essays will need to produce arguments or explanations in response to a question. A customer writing a letter of complaint to a commercial company will need to list grievances and offer good reasons why compensation should be offered. A sales manager creating policy proposals will try to drum up new strategies for the company. All of these writing tasks will entail the generation of material or the creation of ideas as well as just making a record of an event or an opinion.

Start brainstorming

When faced with a writing task of this kind, some people find it useful to generate preliminary ideas by 'brainstorming' the subject or the topic(s) concerned. This is often a good way to produce material as a first step towards planning your work. The activity is a *preliminary stage* in the writing process, and you should keep in mind that it acts principally as a pump-priming exercise to supply you with thoughts, topics, and material for your writing task.

This stage is sometimes called the 'pre-writing' phase in producing a piece of work. That is, you are doing some of the thinking and the organising of materials which goes on before putting pen to paper or finger to keyboard. It is sometimes argued that active engagement with your subject at this stage should help you to produce ideas more fluently later, when you are actually in the process of producing the work.

Many people make the mistake of embarking on a writing task without any sort of preparation. This is fine if you are confident, fluent, and very experienced. But for most people, starting off without any notes or plans imposes an added burden which makes the writing task much more difficult. If you haven't made any preparatory notes, you will have to think up the ideas for your piece of work whilst you are actually producing it. This will be in *addition* to facing the difficulty of writing down what you are trying to say.

The generation of ideas before you start the actual task of writing can therefore remove this one layer of difficulty. By making a note of your ideas and arranging them into some order, you are splitting up the writing task into more easily manageable components. With a page of rough notes, you will not need to wonder what to say next. The notes act as a prompt, reminding you what topics you need to cover. You can also add to the list of notes if any new ideas emerge whilst you are writing.

Put it on paper

The following method is one of the most popular and straightforward approaches to the generation of ideas. It works best if you are prepared to use plenty of paper. Don't try fitting everything onto one sheet. First, take a sheet of blank paper and write *in the middle of the page* the subject, topic(s), or the question you have to consider. Then, without editing or querying your thoughts in any way, write down *everything* that comes into your mind which is connected with the subject. Try to fill the page with topics and trigger-words. Don't stop to censure or re-arrange what you write. That comes later.

This stage should be done in note form, with very abbreviated reminders or single words. Don't try to write out grammatically complete sentences. Give your thoughts a chance to flow freely. Write down even trivial or vaguely associated items: they might help you to make connexions with other points which are more centrally important to the subject.

This might seem a trivial point, but it is important that your subject is placed in the *middle* of the page. This creates a page layout which is more encouraging to lateral thinking and forming connections. Some people make the mistake of writing the main topic at the head of the page. The problem with this is that they then usually create *lists* of ideas beneath the heading. This arrangement can create a false sense of hierarchy in the points made. It also inhibits the possibility of making connections between them.

When you have filled the page with notes, your next task will be to make some sense of the topics or the ideas you have produced. This will involve putting the material into some sort of order or creating logical groups — a process often known as 'categorising'.

Pick the best

Prior to that stage however, you should look over what you have written down. Eliminate anything which is not directly connected to your subject. Think carefully, but then be prepared to scrap anything which will not be of any use to you in creating order or making a plan. Be as rigorous as possible at this stage. Keep asking yourself: 'Are these arguments or topics directly relevant to the subject in question?'

If there is any doubt, or you feel uncertain about eliminating material, just put the items on one side for the moment. You can create the equivalent of a 'pending' file. This might mean nothing more than putting a circle round a word or phrase. You *might* use these items in your final arrangement, or you might not. The usefulness of these items could become more clear as your plan develops. If anything seems clearly irrelevant however, throw it out. This will be one item fewer to consider.

The best arrangement for your ideas will depend upon the subject and the form of the writing. However, you should try to develop the skill of seeing connections between separate items. Consider how they might be formed into groups or put in some order which offers coherence and logical development. At this stage you are clustering, listing, or networking the topics, and seeking any significant relationships between them.

Be prepared to have several attempts at this process. Your first efforts may not create the most persuasive or attractive order. Keep working at it. All the effort you put into the task at this stage will be rewarded when it comes to the actual writing. You will be freed from one of the worst fears to afflict those sitting in front of a blank page: 'What shall I write next?'

Even if you are not a student faced with the task of writing coursework essays, you might look at the section called **Writing Essays (Chapter 16)**.

This process of generating ideas and putting them in some order is an important part of that academic discipline. Its lessons can be put to profitable use in many other forms of writing, and it represents a valuable exercise in clear thinking. You will not be wasting your time.

If you are a computer user, the keyboard and editing screen are probably not the best place for this activity. This is a task for paper and pencil. Only the most experienced would not be inhibited by the mechanisms on getting the results on screen. However, you may wish to put the *results* of your brainstorming onto the screen. This can then be used as a plan for your writing task. Each one of the points can be expanded and developed. Save each stage of your argument — and watch the work grow! (See **Using computers - Chapter 17**).

I have described this process assuming that you might be drumming up ideas from your own imagination (which is the most challenging case). For some tasks however, it might be possible to use other sorts of prompt material. Photographs, newspaper cuttings, even physical objects might be used to help promote your ideas. Use whatever items help you best.

This approach is recommended for those who feel hesitant and in need of some guidance. But other strategies are possible. Depending on the nature of your task or on your intellectual temperament, you might find that your ideas are best assembled as you go along, or that they *emerge* from the work you do on your task: (see **Writing Strategies - Chapter 14**). However, for the vast majority of writers, creating some ideas before you begin will ease the task.

It is also possible that some people will be able to do all this in the mind, without writing anything on paper. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes uses a technique of assembling ideas whilst he is taking a walk.

> I must write the book out in my head... before I sit down. I always follow a triangular pattern on my walks ... After visiting these three places, I return home, and by that time I have mentally written tomorrow's six or seven pages.

However, it should be said that he is a very experienced writer and that this is a fairly advanced skill. If it works for you, use it by all means; but for most people creating plenty of notes on paper will probably be the most reassuring method.

Concept trees

It is also true that some people prefer to let their ideas emerge whilst they are in the process of writing. They make a start with perhaps just a vague notion as a point of departure, then go where their imagination suggests. This process is sometimes called a 'discovery' writing strategy, and will almost certainly require substantial revisions and redrafting. It might be a fruitful approach for more experienced writers or those engaged in imaginative writing, but beginners will probably be better served with rough notes or a detailed plan.

One other technique which some people find useful is known in the world of study skills as the 'concept tree'. In this, the subject is once again placed in the middle of the page. Then arms or lines are drawn from it like the main branches of a tree: these are named as sub-sections or principal aspects of the subject. From each of these are then drawn smaller lines which might be likened to the twigs which radiate from branches: these are the subsidiary aspects of the subject. The problem with this approach is that you are deciding what is more important in *advance*, and this can deter the free flow of your ideas. It also might inhibit the discovery of connexions between individual parts. I mention it here because it seems to work [in my experience] for about one person in every class.

3 Taking notes

Taking notes

Many forms of writing are preceded by taking notes. You might be attending a lecture, conducting an interview, or reading a book. Note-taking skills are required when taking the minutes at a meeting, keeping details of a business engagement, or recording your observations whilst making a visit somewhere. All these activities require you to record information — both efficiently and accurately. The writing task which lies ahead in each case will be affected by the quality of your notes.

Taking good notes is a very useful skill — and not simply because you are making a record which can be used later. It also involves the ability to analyse, digest, and select information. These are valuable intellectual assets which will help you to control the data or the activity with which you are dealing. You will come closer to the writing task in hand if you have engaged with it in this way first.

Your notes should act as a 'translation' of an activity [lecture, reading, committee meeting] into your own words. This will assist your understanding of it. Instead of just receiving the information passively (in which case you are more likely to forget it) you are digesting it, processing it, and putting it into the context of your existing knowledge.

The activity of taking notes should stimulate your engagement with the subject. It is commonly observed that writing down one idea often (via association) produces ideas about another. Write those extra ideas down as well: even if they are to do with another part of your activity, they can be transferred there later. Experienced note-takers usually develop a personal coding system which helps them to keep track of all their information.

Processing information

Taking notes will help to produce a strong memory trace of detail. This will be more effective than just passively reading, looking or listening. You are far more likely to remember information in six or nine months' time if you have made a good set of notes whilst attending a lecture or reading a book. This is a particularly important strategy and skill for those who may have to sit any kind of examination. Your notes represent information which has been processed and put into a context.

Some of the most diligent people even re-write their notes immediately after they have been made. For students this might be after a lecture or the reading of a book. For those in business, it might be immediately after a meeting. This allows you to produce a neat set of materials for future use, and it also reinforces your understanding of the subject. It will certainly be useful if you need to refer to them again at a much later date, or if you need to pass on the notes for someone else's use.

Even though your notes might represent an intermediate stage in the writing process, get into the habit of treating them with respect. You might throw them away in six months' time, but meanwhile keep them stored in a folder or binder. This is especially true for all students, who might need to keep all their notes throughout an entire three or four year course. They may always be useful to you at a later stage when writing essays or revising for examinations.

How to take notes

When taking notes, you should be making a compressed and accurate record of information. Your objective is to distinguish the more important from the less important points in question. You should *not* attempt to make an exact reproduction of the original information. If you need detail of this kind, photocopies or an exact transcript would be called for.

Taking notes is a very *active* form of writing skill. You should be listening, watching, or reading closely, thinking about the content, and deciding which parts of the subject to record for your own use. By engaging positively with your material in this way, you will be strengthening the memory traces which your notes will activate at a later date.

You should also be converting the essence of the subject into your own words. Don't try to copy down undigested chunks of the original in the belief that it will be of more use to you. [This is a rare instance where having shorthand writing skills is not an advantage.]

Always use loose-leaf A4 paper. This is now the internationally accepted standard for most printed matter, and you will find it easier to keep track of your notes if they fit easily alongside other materials. Journalists or people making on-the-spot observations may prefer to use small spiral-bound notepads; but minute-takers, business people, and students will probably find it easier to keep their notes in A4 format.

Write as clearly as possible, and leave a space between each entry. Don't try to cram as much as possible onto one page. Laying out notes in a spacious manner on the page will make it easier to recapture information. Many people have a keenly developed visual memory, and good page layout can help you to digest and recall what you have written.

Use some system of tabulation. That is, number your points. Even if the progression of numbers doesn't mean a great deal, it will help you to keep one point distinct from another. Whatever you do, don't string the points together as continuous writing. If you do this you will find it very difficult to disentangle these items at a later date.

Notes — not writing

Don't attempt to write continuous prose. You can write in grammatically incomplete sentences. Miss out words which are not important. Remember, these are your *own* notes, not finished prose writing.

Use a new page for each new topic. Do not try to create a false economy by having notes on 'Palmerston's Foreign Policy' sharing the same page as 'Approaches to the Boer War'. Keep things separate, and have them clearly titled and labelled to facilitate easy recall. If you were taking notes on visits to two different engineering sites, it makes sense to keep the two sets of information separate.

Write on one side of the page only. This may seem scandalously wasteful at first, but it will be useful in the long term. You can always make additions to your notes on the blank sides of the page — or add details from your sources which may be needed later. [It is a well-observed fact that those who write on both sides of their pages are the very people whose work is often out of order.]

Use lettering, numbering, and indentation for sections and sub-sections of the notes. This helps to keep the items visually separate and thus easier to recall and use again. The act of laying out information in this way will cause you to assess the importance of each detail in relation to the rest.

Abbreviations

Use a system of abbreviations. If you were summarising a discussion between John Brown, Jane Smithson, and Alec Winterton, you do not need to keep writing out their names in full: their initials, JB, JS, and AW would be enough. Similarly, in an essay on the House of Commons or the Prime Minister there is no need to keep writing out these terms. HC and PM would explain the subject more briefly. Many people also use common mathematical symbols such as +, =, and >, as well as typographical symbols such as £, &, #, @, and %.

Whilst making a clear distinction between major points and smaller illustrative details of your subject, you may also wish to record the occasional telling item or quotable phrase. This will give your notes a sense of life and perhaps provide items which will add impact to your work at a later date. *example* You might also need to note items of statistics if they are important.

In conjunction with your notes, use diagrams, graphs, pictures, or any other type of appropriate visual material. This may help to preserve a record and fix the material for future use. One good picture can often do the work of a hundred or even a thousand words. Many people have very good visual memories. Collect together such materials and store them close to the notes for which they are appropriate.

Devise your own personal code of abbreviations and signs. These can be used to comment on your materials. A single or double line for degrees of emphasis, a question mark as a query [?], and an exclamation mark for surprise [!]. A system of coding can also be used to relate notes to the main issues or the location where they will be stored. Do this if you find it useful, but remember to be consistent.

Keep your notes stored in a loose-leaf binder or a pocket file. Use coloured dividers to keep separate sections distinct. The advantage of this method is that you can add new notes without disrupting the system. You might also wish to re-write some pages, and you can also add diagrams, pictures, or other illustrative material. You might be collecting materials to write an article. All of them can be stored with your notes, and this will give you a growing sense of the scope of your topic.

Taking notes from speech

When taking notes during lectures or speeches, you will find the task easier if you have prepared beforehand. Learn in advance the main headings, names, or concepts which the speaker is likely to use. It will be easier to incorporate into your notes any key terms and words with which you are already familiar.

Be an active listener. This means paying close attention to what the speaker is saying, and at the same time *thinking* about what is being said. Try to follow the development of the argument or the explanation. This can sometimes be quite difficult, and you will need to concentrate.

Look at the speaker and watch for any signals or clues. Many people will give verbal emphasis to things which they consider important. Pay attention to the beginning when the speaker might give some idea of the ground which is to be covered. Listen carefully to the conclusion when a good speaker will try to draw together all the main points of the speech or lecture into one coherent statement.

Your objective is to record the main points of the speech. Don't make the mistake of trying to write down everything that is said. You will never keep up. It is much more useful to *listen carefully* to what the speaker is saying. Record the key issues or the main ideas, rather than the detail which surrounds them.

Enter into a silent questioning dialogue with what is being said. Do not take anything for granted, and be prepared to doubt — wisely. If you have observations or reservations of your own, write them down in square brackets [like this] to separate them from your notes on the speech.

Taking notes whilst in a meeting requires good listening skills. This means more than just paying attention to what people say. You will probably need to make a summary of the main items that are being discussed, possibly attributing any bright ideas to the individuals who made them, and making distinctions between what is important and what is trivial. Acquaint yourself in advance with the form in which the record must be made. Most organisations have their own habits and protocols, and your task will be easier if you know about these matters before the event. This is especially true of the minutes of committee meetings.

Try to make a clear distinction between the central points of the subject in hand, and any illustrative examples or details. This can be quite difficult if you are trying to summarise a discussion, because you must concentrate on what people are saying, and it may not be clear if they are making a main or a subsidiary point. [After all, people don't speak in well ordered paragraphs.] This a clear case for using sub-sections, indentation, and clear labelling.

The best time for reviewing and adjusting your notes is immediately after the speech has ended. All the information should still be fresh in your mind. At this point you can eliminate any of the less important information you may have recorded, and you can put the main arguments into prominence.

Books and articles

When taking notes whilst reading, always start by making an accurate bibliographic record of the material you are using. At the head of your notes write down the following sequence: *author, title, date, edition*. If it is an articlefrom a scholarly journal: *author, article title, journal name (and number), publication date.*

You are recording this information so that if you use quotations, you will be able to give an accurate reference to their source. The recording of this information will also save time if you have to recover the material on a second occasion from a library. This often happens when working on longer writing projects such as reports, dissertations, or theses when you might need further information from the same source.

Some people skim an entire book in the first instance to get an overview, then choose the parts which will be most useful. They might also read a relevant section *first*, then read it again, taking detailed notes. Others (students of the novel for instance) may choose a single reading, making notes as they go along. Your strategy will depend upon your subject and the length of the material you are reading. It will also be affected by the amount of time you have at your disposal. (See the examples given in **Writing strategies - Chapter 14**)

You should *not* copy out long sections from the work in hand. This is time badly spent. Even if you think a passage is interesting, it will usually help you more to make a digest of its argument or exposition in your own words. If you need a long passage for future reference or quotation, just take a photocopy of the pages.

Short quotes

Shorter quotes are a different matter. If a few words strike you as providing some clinching piece of evidence, then make a note of them. Remember to *always make a note of the page on which they occur*. This will give you accurate reference, and it could save you a lot of time if you need to check a quotation later.

How can you know what to make a note *of*? This will depend entirely upon the purpose of your writing task and your experience of the subject. You should try to grasp its main issues. You might do this by noting any key terms or phrases which are repeated in the material. Try to make a summary of the author's argument. Note anything which seems like a recurrent theme. Relate your notes to each other.

If the book or the article is your own, you might wish to make marginal notes on the page itself — in pencil. When reading your own copy of a textbook for instance, you can record your own personal responses and observations in the margins. But do not make notes in library books — for two good reasons. As soon as you return the book to the library, your notes will disappear. It is also bad manners to write in library books. Leave others with a clean text, as you would wish for yourself.

Don't make the beginner's mistake of underlining every line in a paragraph. If you think the content of a particular section is especially significant, it will be of more use if you try to say *why* as a brief note. Put a mark in the margin, and summarise the issue in a brief note at the head of the page. All of this will be of far more use than lines scrawled across the page — which may mean nothing to you in several months' time.

If you are using a book from a library, keep a full record of it. Write out the library catalogue number in full. This could save you a lot of time going through the catalogue index for a second time at a later stage. If the catalogue number (in the Dewey system) is 832.8 M/324, *don't* just write 832.8, otherwise you will have to look through all the books in that section, which might be quite large. With the complete number you can go straight to those authors whose surnames begin with M, then locate book number 324 under that letter.

What follows is an example of notes taken whilst listening to an Open University radio broadcast — a half hour lecture by Isaiah Berlin entitled 'Tolstoy's Views on Art and Morality', which was part of the Open University course A 312 — *The Nineteenth Century Novel and its Legacy.*

The pages that follow are designed as single and double-page print-friendly resources you can use in your work. *Resource pages.*

Isaiah Berlin — 'Tolstoy on Art and Morality' 3 Sep 89

1. T's views on A extreme — but he asks important questns which disturb society

2. 1840s Univ of Kazan debate on purpose of A

   T believes there should be simple answers to probs of life

3. Met simple & spontaneous people & soldiers in Caucasus

   'Crimean Sketches' admired by Turgenev & Muscovites but T didn't fit in milieu

4. Westernizers Vs Slavophiles — T agreed with Ws but rejects science

   (Ss romantic conservatives)

5. Two views of A in mid 19C — art for art's sake/ art for society's sake

6. Pierre (W&P) and Levin (AK) as egs of 'searchers for truth'

7. Natural life (even drunken violence) better than intellectual

8. T's contradiction — to be artist or moralist

9. T's 4 criteria for work of art

   - know what you want to say — lucidly and clearly
   - subject matter must be of essential interest
   - artist must live or imagine concretely his material
   - A must know the moral centre of situation

10. T crit of Shkspre and Goethe — too complex

11. St Julien (Flaubert) inauthentic

12. Turgenev and Chekhov guilty of triviality

13. What is Art? Emotion recollected and transmitted to others [Wordsworth] Not self-expression — Only good should be transmitted

14. But his own tastes were for high art — Chopin, Beethoven, & Mozart — T Argues he himself corrupted

15. Tried to distinguish between his own art and moral tracts

16. 'Artist cannot help burning like a flame'

17. Couldn't reconcile contradictions in his own beliefs
    Died still raging against self and society

4 Punctuation

Punctuation

Punctuation in writing is the equivalent of the pauses, emphasis, and inflexion which we use whilst speaking. There are a few basic rules, but beyond that punctuation is ultimately a matter of personal style. Nevertheless, it is a feature of writing which sometimes creates strong feeling and controversy. Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells [or the latest Minister of Education] is just as likely to complain about 'falling standards' in punctuation as about the way we pronounce the word 'harassment'.

If you are in any doubt about punctuation, then start by using as little of it as possible. Write short, direct sentences. Keep everything simple. It is perfectly possible to write clearly and efficiently using only the comma and the full stop. You do not need to master the subtleties of the finer points in order to produce simple, clear writing.

The basic rules of punctuation are fairly straightforward. When you have gained a clear understanding of them you may wish to adapt them to suit your own style. But make sure you know the rules first. Most writers who bend or disobey the rules of their craft only do so after they have mastered the basics.

Faulty punctuation is rather like poor spelling: it might be tolerated, but it creates a bad impression. Readers will become irritated if your punctuation does not fall at the natural points of stress created by the sense of what you are writing. They may not even realise what is causing their bewilderment, but they are likely to either stop reading or develop a growing sense of resentment.

Too much punctuation is unsettling for the reader. It has the same sort of effect as unnatural stress, intonation, and pronunciation in speech. Too little punctuation on the other hand (particularly if combined with long sentences) will place too heavy a burden of interpretation on the reader, and it may cause ambiguity and obscurity.

In almost all forms of writing you can simplify matters by using short, clear sentences. For most purposes these will usually be more effective than those which are long and complex. If you follow this suggestion you will need less punctuation and more people will understand your message. Split up any longer sentences into two or three which are shorter.

The four principal marks of punctuation are the comma (,) the semicolon (;) the colon (:) and the full stop (.). They are used to introduce pauses or 'breathing spaces' into a sentence. Each of these marks represents a pause of increasing length — the comma a very slight pause, and the full stop as its name implies, a halt. It is the two in between which call for more subtle handling and which many people feel are problematic. But remember — you don't have to use them if you are at all uncertain or if you prefer to avoid them.

The paragraph which follows demonstrates the correct use of the comma, semicolon, colon, and full stop.

> Punctuation should always be used lightly, even sparingly, and as accurately as possible. You will discover through practice that there are three basic rules: the comma, semicolon, and colon mark increasingly long pauses; full stops separate distinct sentences; and a new paragraph should always be used to begin a new topic or point of argument.

The comma

This is the least emphatic of the pauses. It marks a light hesitation or interruption in the sentence. This can occur in a number of different grammatical instances.

Separating two clauses when the first is not closely associated with the second: *Cars should turn left here, whilst foot passengers should continue towards the exit.*

Introducing a pause where the eye might otherwise continue and momentarily mistake the sense of what was written: *In the valley below, the villages looked very small.*

Separating a sequence of adjectives which qualify a noun in the same manner: *An arrogant, loquacious man.* However, when the adjectives are of a different order or type, no comma is necessary: *He was a distinguished foreign visitor.*

Separating items in a list: Opinions vary on the necessity of the final comma in such examples. If the items are all of the same kind, there is probably little chance of ambiguity. If they are not, it is usually safer to retain the comma.

Marking the beginning and end of a parenthetical phrase within a sentence: *I am quite sure, despite all my reservations on the matter, that he is doing the right thing.*

Confusion is sometimes sown by the insertion of commas where they are not really necessary: *The strangest of all these new sensations, was the onset of profound happiness.*

Commas should not be used to connect two separate sentences as a casual substitute for the full stop: *A party has been arranged, it will take place next week.* This is poor writing. The statement should be made either as two separate sentences, or if they are to be brought together because of their natural connection, a conjunction is required: *A party has been arranged, and it will take place next week.*

Even though in some cases a comma may not be absolutely necessary for retaining grammatical coherence, it may still be useful in order to clarify the meaning for a reader. *Each night you stay at a Roberts-Plaza Moat Houses UK hotel at the fully published or corporate rate you are entitled to a special discount voucher.* This poorly phrased statement would be improved by the insertion of a comma after the word 'rate'.

What follows is an example of an entire paragraph which has been punctuated using only the comma and the full stop. [It also illustrates, rather deftly, the function of the 'topic sentence': see **Paragraphs**.]

> The central thought or main controlling idea of a paragraph is usually conveyed in what is called a topic sentence. This important sentence which states, summarises or clearly expresses the main theme, is the keystone of a well-built paragraph. The topic sentence may come anywhere in the paragraph, though most logically and in most cases it is the first sentence. This immediately tells readers what is coming, and leaves them in no doubt about the overall controlling idea. In a very long paragraph, the initial topic sentence may even be restated or given a more significant emphasis in its conclusion.

The semicolon

This is one of the most commonly misused and misunderstood marks of punctuation (a close second to the apostrophe). If you are in any doubt at all concerning its correct use, then *avoid using it entirely.*

The semicolon represents a pause which is longer than a comma but shorter than a full stop. It is used in general to separate clauses which could stand alone, but which are closely related. When the second clause expands or explains the first: *Neither of us spoke; we merely waited patiently in silence to see what would happen.*

When the clauses describe a sequence of actions or different aspects of the same topic: *There was a sharp, bracing air; the ground beneath us was dry; the sea was calm and clear.*

Before clauses which begin with 'nevertheless', 'therefore', 'even so', and 'for instance': *He took great care; even so he made a few errors.*

To mark off a series of phrases or claustes which themselves contain commas: *You will need the following materials: some scrap paper; a pen, preferably blue or black; some envelopes; and some good, white, unlined writing paper.*

The colon

This is used to introduce quite a strong pause within a sentence. It separates two clauses which *could* stand alone as separate sentences, but are linked by some relationship in their meaning.

It is used to introduce a list: *The car has a number of optional extras: a sun roof, shatterproof windscreen, rear seat belts, and electrically operated windows.*

It normally precedes a long quotation or a speech: *Speaking at Caesar's funeral, Anthony addresses the crowd: "Friends, Romans, countrymen ..."*

It is used before a clause which explains (often by way of illustration) the previous statement. It suggests the sense of 'That is to say' or 'Namely': *The school is highly regarded: academic standards are high, the staff are pleasant, and the students enjoy going there.*

It is used to indicate a sharp contrast or dramatic opposition: *My brother likes oranges: my sister hates them.*

Note that the colon followed by a dash (:—) is *never* necessary. This is called a 'pointer'. Some people put these before a list, but the colon alone should be sufficient.

The apostrophe

This is probably the most publicly misused mark of punctuation. Look at the labels advertising vegetables on any market stall: you will see signs announcing *Coxes' Best, Lovely Caulis'*, and *Carrot's 56p/lb* [all of these are incorrectly used]. Most people can avoid the perils of the semicolon with a little ducking and weaving, but the apostrophe is something for which there is really no alternative.

There is a school of thought which argues that the apostrophe no longer serves much useful purpose. Supporters of this line point out that in most written statements there is very little chance of creating ambiguity even if the apostrophe is omitted. A statement such as *This is Margarets coat* is not likely to be misunderstood. However, rather like the other 'rules' of good writing, you should make sure that you understand *how* and *when* it should be used before you dash to join the abolitionists.

The apostrophe (') has two functions: it indicates both the possessive case and contractions. These are separate grammatical issues, but what they have in common is that the apostrophe denotes a letter which has been omitted from the word. In the possessive case this is a letter e which used to be included up to the eighteenth century. In the case of contractions two words are fused into one, and omitted letters represented by the raised comma.

The possessive case

We can say either *The whiskers of the cat* or *the cat's whiskers.* This is the possessive case, when something belongs to something or somebody else. (The possessive case of cat would originally have been spelled *cates*.)

When the possessor is single we indicate possession by using an apostrophe followed by the letter 's': *The man's coat, my sister's hat.*

When the possessors are plural, the apostrophe is placed after the final 's': *The ladies' cloakroom, my cousins' parents.*

When names end with the letter 's', either use is acceptable: *James' wife* or *James's wife*. It is sometimes argued that the choice should be made on the grounds of how the word would normally be spoken — *Jamze* or *Jamzez.*

The apostrophe is never used with possessive pronouns: *his, hers, its, ours, yours, theirs*. But it is used with 'one': *One must do one's best.*

The spelling of place names often causes confusion, because the apostrophe is used in some but not others. We write *Land's End* and *St John's Wood*, but *Golders Green, St Helens*, and *Owens College.* There doesn't seem to be any alternative to learning the correct form in such cases. Similarly, it is worth noting that many shops and business concerns these days omit the apostrophe from their titles, as in *Barclays Bank*, and *Coopers Wines.* There is also a tendency to leave out the apostrophe when there is no direct sense of possession, as in the expressions *a girls school and gents hairdresser.*

Although many people put them there, no apostrophes are necessary after dates, as in *during the 1930s*. This is a case where the plural form is being mistaken for the possessive case.

Contraction

In formal prose we would write *She has told him*, but when speaking we would say *She's told him*. The two words are being fused into one, and an apostrophe is being used to indicate the missing letters. [When this device first came into general use, both letters might be indicated, as in *She"s*.]

I am (*I'm*); He is (*he's*); You are (*You're*).

Note the difference between *it's* (it is) and *its* (belonging to it) as well as between *you're* (you are) and *your* (belonging to you). These are very commonly confused.

Contractions create a conversational tone which might be appropriate in a personal letter, advertising copy, or fictional dialogue. They tend to draw the reader closer to the writer. But beware of using them in formal writing, where such a tone may be inappropriate. If you are writing an academic essay, a company report, or a piece of journalism they will create a manner of writing which was too casual.

Miscellaneous punctuation

Brackets

(whose technical name is parenthesis) should normally be used with restraint. They are used to indicate a supplementary remark or a qualification of some sort. However, if they are used too often they interrupt the flow of the writing and create a choppy, unsettling effect. They function grammatically in the same way as a pair of commas, but their use normally suggest that the remarks are of slightly less importance than if commas were used.

Notice that brackets are always used in pairs. The 'outer' sentence [like this one, for instance] should be grammatically complete even if the bracketed remarks were to be removed. When used within a sentence, no further punctuation is required after they have been closed.

If on the other hand brackets surround an entire sentence, then the full stop at its end stays within them. *(This is the procedure you should follow.)* If the brackets only surround part of the sentence, the full stop goes outside. *This is the procedure you should follow (under normal circumstances).*

Square brackets

[like these] are used to indicate authorial additions, changes to, or your own comments on somebody else's writing. For instance, if you are quoting a text which requires brief amplification, you would insert your own remarks between square brackets. The reader then knows that the explanation is yours. [I am using them in these notes to indicate authorial comment.]

> Thompson's article then goes on to claim that 'these dramatic upheavals [in government policy] were heralded by cabinet reshuffles earlier in the year' and it ends with an analysis of the election results.

A common example of using square brackets occurs when you are quoting someone else's words which contain a mistake or an inaccuracy. You wish to indicate that the mistake is in the original and is not of your own making, so you insert between square brackets the term *sic* (which means *so*, or *thus*):

> Mrs Bennett wrote a letter to the headmistress explaining that her son Johnny had not been to school because 'he had been fritened [sic] by some of the older boys and girls'.

Exclamation marks

(!) and question marks (?) should be used with restraint in most formal writing. If they are used too often they tend to create a slightly juvenile or over-excited tone. Indeed, the more frequently they are used, the weaker becomes their effect. Although you might use these marks in multiples for extra emphasis or amusing effect in personal or creative writing (*Gadzooks!!* or *What on earth was **that**!?*) they should only be used singly in any sort of formal writing.

The dash

(—) normally indicates a dramatic break or an illustration. *It happened all at once — just as I sat down!* They may be used singly to indicate an afterthought or a climax, or in pairs to insert an explanatory comment or a short list: *Everything — furniture, paintings, and books — miraculously survived the fire.* They should not normally be used as a substitute for parentheses — or mixed with them. They belong to informal modes of writing such as popular journalism, personal correspondence, and notes. Try to minimise the use of the dash in formal writing.

The hyphen

(-) is a short dash used to connect prefixes to words (*multi-storey car park*) or when forming compounds such as *son-in-law* or *a couldn't-care-less attitude.* Notice however that we say *a up-to-date plan,* but *the plan was up to date.* The hyphen can also be used to make a distinction between *resign* (to give up) and *re-sign* (to sign again).

It can also be used with prefixes such as *co-* and *pre-* where they are followed by the same vowel in words like *co-operative* and *pre-eminent*. [However, you should be warned that some grammarians will insist upon *cooperate*, and there are even those who go as far as making claims for *coöperate*.]

Hyphens are often used to form new words by linking two existing terms in expressions such as *multi-national* and *post-graduate*. But in the course of time, as people become accustomed to these compounds, the hyphen is often dropped, so that the words become *multinational* and *postgraduate*. One example in current circulation is word-processor, which in America has already become *wordprocessor*.

Oblique stroke

(/) should not be used as a substitute for words such as *and, plus*, and *or*. Try to avoid the *either/or* construction, the silly *s/he*, and such woolly compounds as *an entire social/sexual/ideological system*. The simplest way to avoid these problems is to write statements out in full.

Too frequent or uncontrolled use of these marks of punctuation tends to create a loose, sloppy style. In general you should keep them strongly in check, otherwise you might produce writing as bad as this, which comes from a serious book on film criticism: *What went wrong? — how was the political impetus of the late 60's/70's lost that manifested itself so strikingly in the field of film study?*

Quotations

are normally shown in single quote marks — 'like this'. When quoting speech use double quote marks: "*These conventions are designed to give your essays a pleasing and well-designed appearance," the tutor said to the students.*

You do not need to put full stops after Mr, Dr, Co, or any other commonly used titles. Neither are they required in well known company names such as BBC and IBM. The current tendency in most forms of public writing and print-presentation is to remove any punctuation which is not absolutely necessary.

The same is true of punctuating such things as addresses on letterheads, business stationery, and envelopes. Old-style page layout suggested progressive indentation and the use of commas at the end of each line. Modern usage tends to omit most punctuation and use left-alignment instead.

MODERN	OLDSTYLE
Mrs E Fullbright 11 Meadowland Lane Upper Oxbridgeton Ellsmeretown	Mrs. E. Fullbright, 11, Meadowland Lane, Upper Oxbridgeton, Ellsmeretown.

In general, you should try to avoid double punctuation in cases such as *etc.*, *viz.*, and *e.g.*. [Notice the unsightly double punctuation at the end of that sentence.] This level of pedantic correctness may sometimes be called for in academic writing at dissertation and thesis level, but for most forms of written communication a much simpler style is appropriate. It can be avoided by not using abbreviations (a good practice in itself) but writing out the words in full, *for example*.

The ellipsis

(...) is commonly used for two purposes. First, to indicate that words have been omitted from a passage being quoted. It is a useful device for shortening what might otherwise be long statements, and can help to focus attention on what is most essential. However, ellipses [that's the plural] should not be used to distort the meaning of the original, and you should take care to maintain grammatical coherence between the quotation and your own text.

The second popular use for ellipsis is in prose fiction where it usually denotes a brief pause in thought or action, a hesitation, a sense of trailing off, or an interruption in a character's speech. See the following example:

> She looked at herself in the mirror, tossing her head several times to make the beads jingle. Then she opened a chest and began taking out...first a dress with red and blue polka-dots (Chekhov)

Note that the ellipsis is indicated not by two, or four, or any random number, but by *three* full stops (technically, *periods*) in the text. To be absolutely accurate, if an ellipsis comes at the end of a sentence, it should be followed by a space then a full stop.

As we all know from our schooldays, full stops go at the end of sentences. Not many people have problems with this rule. However, they are not necessary in main titles or in bulleted lists. *Chapter Six* or *The Turn of the Screw* do not need punctuation: their importance should be quite obvious by their position on the page or the emphasis they are given. Similarly, it should not be necessary to pretend that the elements of a list form continuous prose. (See **Editing - Chapter 12**).

5 Grammar

Grammar

Don't be frightened! Grammar is just the name given to a set of conventions underlying our use of language. Most people who wish to improve their writing skills do not want to be burdened with having to memorise grammatical rules, and we're *not* going to do that here. The formal study of grammar may be an interesting part of linguistics, but it is not the best way to improve the fluency and precision of your writing. This might seem a somewhat heretical view, but it is based on the observation that most people are not seeking the technical names and the causes of these grammatical problems. What they are looking for is help in avoiding them and examples of good usage.

It is also unlikely that anyone could develop a good sense of language-use by trying to *learn* the rules of grammar. This would be rather like learning to drive a car by studying a repair manual. A far more fruitful approach [in addition to practising your own writing] would be to *read* as much as possible. You can develop a sense of the rhythms and the nuances of a fluent prose style by reading the work of successful writers.

However, if there are some points of grammar with which you regularly have difficulties, you should be prepared to clarify the issues for yourself. Get hold of a book which explains grammar *at the level you require.* I am not going to deal with all the niceties of parts of speech and the relationship of clauses here, otherwise this book would be twice as long as it is. Some of the basic issues are dealt with as part of nearby sections, such as **Punctuation — Chapter 4 and Sentences — Chapter 7.**

But there are some very common problems which we can briefly examine here, partly because they are fairly straightforward, and partly because they are caused by grammatical weaknesses. Seeing these issues explained may help you to avoid mistakes. I have tried to explain the details involved with the absolute minimum of technical jargon.

Case agreement

If the subject of a sentence is singular, then the verb form must be in the singular form as well. If the subject is plural, then the verb form must be plural.

Correct:	The shop [singular] *opens* at nine o'clock.
Correct:	On Thursdays the shops [plural] *open* late.

Sometimes confusion occurs because a statement begins in the singular but then gradually drifts into the plural. The easiest solution to this problem is to make the subject plural and its verb plural as well.

Wrong:	I always feel that a person has a right to know when they are dying

This statement is grammatically incorrect, because it starts in the singular (*a* person) but then drifts into the plural (*are* dying). One alternative would be to say 'when *he or she is* dying', but this is rather clumsy. A much better solution therefore is to put the statement into the plural:

Correct:	I always feel that people have a right to know when they are dying.

Sometimes a singular noun is used to denote a plural or a collective thing — such as the government or parliament. Either the singular or the plural verb form may be used — but the important thing is to be consistent.

Wrong:	The government prefers to let matters rest, but events may make them change their minds.
Correct:	The government *prefers* to let matters rest, but events may make *it* change *its* mind.
Correct:	The government *prefer* to let matters rest, but events may make *them* change *their* minds.

Even skilled writers can make mistakes in the matter of case agreement. Sometimes the grammatical subject of the sentence may be singular, whilst its object appears to be plural.

> The most pompous monument of Egyptian greatness, and one of the most bulky works of manual history, are the pyramids. (Samuel Johnson)

The famous grammarian [no relation, by the way] perhaps understandably trips himself up here. *The most pompous monument ...* ***is*** *the pyramids.* Although there is more than one pyramid, the subject of the sentence (the term 'monument') is singular.

A similar difficulty is created when a number of qualifying clauses are inserted after the start of a sentence, causing its author to believe that the case has changed.

> Finding Miss Vernon in a place so solitary, engaged in a journey so dangerous, and under the protection of one gentleman only, were circumstances to excite every feeling of jealousy. (Walter Scott)

Scott wrote his novels so rapidly, it is not surprising that his attention has wandered here. The subject of this sentence is *Finding Miss Vernon*, so its verb and object should be ***was*** *a circumstance.*

Syntax

The term *syntax* is used to describe the grammatical arrangement of words in a sentence — as it would normally be spoken or written in English. For instance, we would normally write *I went to the farm*, but never *I to the farm went* [though this construction would be normal in German]. If you are in any doubt, remember that the common word-order of a simple sentence written in English is as follows:

SUBJECT (**the cat**) — VERB (**ate**) — OBJECT (**the goldfish**)

This might seem like absurdly simple advice, but many of the problems which are caused by a shaky understanding of syntax can be cured by following this pattern.

The problems of word-order in a sentence can be illustrated by a famous advertisement singled out as a warning by *Punch* [the now-defunct satirical magazine]: *Wanted — armchair for old gentleman with sliding back and oak legs.* Obviously a more successful word order would be *Wanted for old gentleman — armchair with sliding back and oak legs.*

Some of the most common problems connected with syntax are caused by two or three closely related factors. First, the sentence is often longer than it needs to be. One clause is tagged on after another until grammatical contact with its beginning is gradually lost. Second, the sentence very often starts with its verb or object, rather than its subject. Third, it might also start with a conjunction (*although, because*) which are terms used to join separate clauses. What follows is an example taken from a student essay which exhibits all three problems [plus one or two more besides].

> But if the harasser is not put in his place clearly and with strength immediately, (An action which doesn't always work any way) then later reports it, again there seems a common problem. — Why did the victim allow it to go on for so long?

These are the most common causes of grammatical confusion. The solution to this problem is to put the subject first, and keep sentences short. Keep them simple and direct.

Conjunctions

Unless you are confident, you should try to avoid starting sentences with words such as *Again, Although, But, And, Also*, and *With.* These are *conjunctions* which are normally used for joining together two or more separate clauses. For instance we might write *The event was still held, although it was raining.* But this might also be expressed as *Although it was raining, the event was still held.* The problem is that many people choose to start sentences with these connecting terms, but they often fail to realise that

they are beginning in the grammatical 'middle' of their statement. They then carry on writing, imagining that they have already made clear the subject of the sentence. They are aware of the subject in their own minds, but they have not bothered to write it down.

Sentence construction

Variations in sentence construction may be used for emphasis and effect — particularly in such modes of writing as imaginative fiction, advertising, or personal correspondence. For any sort of formal writing however, elegant variation is probably best kept to a minimum unless you are quite confident that you have control over the structure of the sentence.

Remember that speech and writing are two different forms of communication. Ungrammatical statements in speech are perfectly normal, but the same statements wouldn't be accepted when written down. Avoid the use of a casual or conversational manner when writing, and do not string together clauses which are grammatically unrelated. Unless you are very confident, avoid using contractions such as *won't, I'll,* and *you're*: these tend to promote a conversational tone.

Gender

Many writers currently send themselves into grammatical convulsions trying to avoid the use of the masculine terms *him* or *his* when speaking of the general public. Not wishing to fall into the trap of writing *The reader will form his own opinion*, they use instead the very clumsy formula *The reader will form his or her own opinion*. Those striving for maximum political correctness will of course write *The reader will form her own opinion* — thinking to jolt readers out of their complacent state of ignorance and to redress one historical injustice by perpetrating another. There is a very simple solution to this problem, and that is to use the plural, which is entirely appropriate when addressing or speaking of a number of people. *Readers will make up their own minds.*

These are some of the most common causes of grammatical problems — but let me repeat a point made earlier: *there are many other causes.* Some of them are dealt with in the adjacent sections on **Punctuation (Chapter 4)** and **Sentences (Chapter 7),** and others are discussed elsewhere in the book. Let me also repeat that this section has not attempted to deal comprehensively with grammar as a subject. For reasons made given in the Introduction, this is an approach to improving writing skills which I am happy to leave to others.

6 Spelling

Spelling

Spelling in the English language is notoriously tricky. It is generally acknowledged to be difficult and inconsistent, and yet many people feel that they will be looked down on if they make spelling mistakes. In any sort of formal writing, they are probably right. Errors in spelling are rather like a wrong note played in a piece of music: all the rest of the performance may be excellent, but that one off-key note will grate badly on the audience.

The odd thing is that spelling is the only element of modern English which is fixed. There is still a certain amount of latitude tolerated in grammar and syntax, and variations in pronunciation can be very wide indeed. Spelling on the other hand has become more or less standardised with the development, spread, and the mass consumption of printed matter. As the authoritative G.H. Vallins says on the matter:

> As far as the reader is concerned, *skillful, skilfull, skillfull*, and *skilful* are all equally intelligible and reasonable ...but *skilful* is the fixed modern form, and we add another *l* at our peril.

[However, the American form is *skillful,* and is probably acceptable to an increasing number these days.]

Why is it so difficult?

Why is English spelling so irregular and difficult? Well, there *are* conventions and rules, but the exceptions to them are so numerous that they don't offer as much support as we might wish. For instance, the well-known mnemonic 'I before *e*, except after *c*' might help us to spell *receipt* [though what is that *p* doing there?] but it would not help us with *seize, species, neither,* and *weird.* Our practice is full of inconsistencies. We write *laundry* but *cemetery, honour* but *honorary, babies* but *donkeys*. These irregularities are caused by the historical complexity of the English language, and the fact that it is made up from the languages of other countries.

English as we know it today is made up of words derived from Old English, Latin, Greek, French — as well as thousands of loan words from many other languages. This produces a basic lexicon of over half a million words — a stockpile which is being increased all the time. We invent and borrow words, and these loan words bring with them their own spelling characteristics.

It is very difficult to predict the spelling of a word in English, for a number of reasons. The same sound may be represented by different letters: for instance, the [f] in *if, cough, stiff*, or the [oo] sound which is common to *zoo, shoe, grew, through, do,* and *blue* . On the other hand, one letter might be pronounced a number of different ways: the [g] sound in *gate, gentle*, and *rouge.* Similarly, the letter *s* has different sounds in *this, these*, and *sugar.* The sound normally indicated by *sh* is represented by *s* in *sure*, by *sc* in *conscious*, by *ch* in *chute*, by *t* in *nation*, and by *c* in *gracious.* And just to make matters more complex still, different combinations of letters might all have the same sound: for instance *ie, ea, ei, eo*, and *ee* all have the same sound in the words *thief, pea, receive, people,* and *peeve.*

Homophones

There are therefore many words in English which have the same sound but different meanings. These are called homophones [having the same sound]. Words such as *there* and *their*, *its* and *it's, here* and *hear* often cause confusion — and those are the easy cases. More complex examples are words such as *compliment* (to praise) and *complement* (the number required), *demur* (to raise objection) and *demure* (quiet and serious). If you think this makes spelling difficult, imagine how people learning English as a second language must feel.

There are also words which not only sound the same, but which even have the same spelling [homographs]. The term *bow* can either be an inclination at the waist, or an implement for shooting arrows. Similarly, *down* could mean the opposite of up, the feathers of a duck, or a hill. Many books which attempt to teach spelling offer lists of these homophones and homographs; but this seems to me to cause more trouble than it solves. Most people have no difficulty recognising the meaning of such terms by the context in which they occur. Trying to memorise them for their own sake is a recipe for bewilderment.

There are also a number of words which cause difficulty because they contain letters which are not pronounced and do not seem to belong in the word at all. For instance, the *p* in *psalm* and *psychology*, the *g* in *gnaw* and *design*, the *k* in *knight* and *know*, the *b* in *comb* and *dumb*, and the *gh* in *daughter* and *fight*. If we had never heard someone pronounce the word *thorough*, it would not be easy to know how.

The terms which most persistently cause trouble are *there-their, to-too, principal-principle, its-it's*. This is not just because these are homophones, but because some people seem to have difficulty with the grammatical differences between the terms. [The list could be longer, but I've chosen these four to illustrate the point.] *There* is a term of direction, *as in the table is over there. Their* means 'belonging to them', as in the phrase this is *their child. To* is a preposition to do with direction, as in *they are going to the fair. Too* on the other hand is an adverb meaning 'more than required', as in there are *too many boys here.* But it can also mean 'as well' or 'also', as in *take these others too.*

Principal means the first of its kind in rank or importance, as in the *principal town in the county* or *the principal of the college;* whereas *principle* means a 'law, code, or fundamental element' as in *a dangerous principle* or *his moral principles.* The term *its* means 'belonging to it', as in *he gave the cat its milk*; whereas *it's* is a contraction of *it is*, as in *it's a funny old world.* (See **Punctuation - Chapter 4**)

Noun or verb?

One common problem in English spelling is knowing the difference between word forms such as *advice* and *advise*. Other common examples are *device* and *devise*, and *practice* and *practise*. The quick solution is to remember that the word is spelt with a *c* when it is a noun, and with an *s* when it is a verb. 'The *advice* he gave me was good, and I will therefore *advise* others to do the same.' Of course you may not be sure whether the word is a noun or a verb — in which case, remember that verbs are used to describe action. They are used to denote somebody doing something. In these cases, use the *s*. [Don't get caught out. American spelling uses the *c* for both word forms.]

Many people have problems deciding where double letters occur in words. Is it *accommodation* or *acommodation, parallel* or *parallell?* [Answer: the first in each case.] Once again, there may be some basic rules, but there are so many exceptions that to list them would just be confusing. There is no easy way round this problem except to look up the word if you are not sure. The correct spelling of words is best learnt by visual memorisation.

Should we write *Krushchev* or *Krushchov*? *connexion* or *connection? judgement or judgment*? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. The option we choose may rest on considerations of aesthetics or political judgement. These alternate spellings may be caused by translation from another language, because English and American spellings are equally acceptable, or because one form has lingered on from an earlier era, alongside its more modern version.

But these are not just considerations of old versus new spellings. Even in the contemporary business of computer technology, manufacturers are not sure whether to write *floppy disc* or *floppy disk.* Moreover, few people can be expected to know the etymological reasons why dictionaries will tell us to write *italicize* and *criticize,* but *exercise* and *supervise.*

House style

Some organisations such as publishing houses and newspapers offer guidance to anyone writing for them by issuing rules on what is called 'House Style'. That is, they make decisions on these matters to which writers are asked to adhere. Perhaps the most famous of these is *The Economist* — a weekly magazine which has always prided itself on the clarity and quality of the writing which appears in its pages. It traditionally made its own house style known to the public. The guidelines became quite famous and were eventually issued as an expensive but useful booklet. Others have since followed their example.

Many guides to good spelling offer exhaustive lists of problematic words as well as synonyms, homophones, and words commonly misused. (*Decimate*, for instance is often used as a synonym for *to destroy completely*, when in fact it only means *reduce by one tenth*.) But there doesn't seem to me much point in trying to remember all these examples: most people who need the advice are more likely to be bewildered than helped by trying to commit to memory a series of what they will perceive as difficulties.

Improve your spelling

How then can you improve your spelling? Well, there are two strategies which are unexciting but likely to have lasting results. The first is to take the trouble to look up words in a dictionary if you are not sure of their correct spelling. The second is to *read* as much good quality writing as you can. What these approaches have in common is that you will be bringing yourself into closer and closer contact with the language. We learn the forms of most common words simply through the process of seeing them.

Of course you may not be *aware* that you are spelling a word incorrectly. What can be done in such a case? Well, if the piece of work is important, you could ask someone else to glance through what you have written. Have the grace to learn from your own mistakes. But a much better approach is simply to get into the habit of checking, checking, and checking again with a dictionary. If you develop this as a regular practice, you will acquire a sense not only of correct spellings, but also of your own weak areas.

Cultivate an interest in words — for their own sake. Take notice of the etymology of the words you look up — that is, where they have come from and how their meanings have evolved. My *Concise Oxford Dictionary* for instance tells me that the word *etymology* is from the Old French *ethimologie,* which is itself formed from the Greek words *etumon* (the literal or original sense of a word) plus the suffix *-logy*, (from the Greek *Logos* — the word) which is used to denote a subject of study — as in socio*logy* and theo*logy*. This may not seem a very exciting procedure, but if developed as a regular habit you will acquire a deeper understanding of the nature of language.

7 Sentences

Sentences

Short, simple sentences are usually more effective than those which are long and complex. Many writers who lack experience create problems by going on too long. Their ideas would often be more effectively expressed in short, clear statements.

The definition of a sentence is that it is a complete unit of expression that can stand alone grammatically (though it may need other sentences around it to make its full meaning clear). All sentences should begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop (or an exclamation or question mark). Most people *know* this rule, but they are not always sure about what makes a 'complete unit'. Sometimes it is not always clear when an idea comes to its natural end.

Clarity and brevity

Obviously, you should take your readership into account. If you know that you are writing for a literate, intelligent audience which has a knowledge of the subject comparable to your own, then there is probably little need to exercise restraint. But if there is any doubt, or if you do not know who your readers will be, then err on the side of clarity and brevity. Remember that in purely numerical terms, more people will be able to understand what you have to say if you express it simply.

If you are writing by hand, punctuate your work firmly, making a clear distinction between marks such as the comma, the semicolon, and the full stop. People with uncertain handwriting sometimes produce a text in which it is difficult to read where one sentence ends and the next begins. (See **Presentation - Chapter 13**)

The notion that all complete sentences must end with a full stop is a very elementary rule, but it is sometimes forgotten when people string together separate statements, punctuating them instead with a comma. The items may relate to the same issue, but they should be given a proper grammatical relationship. The statement *We parked the car in the road, there was no driveway* is not a successful sentence, even though the connection between the two elements is obvious. It should either be two separate statements, or a link between them should be made by use of a conjunction: *We parked the car in the road because there was no driveway.*

Unless you are very confident, avoid starting sentences with words such as *Again, Although, But, And, Also,* and *With*. These are conjunctions, which are used for joining clauses. It is very common for people who lack experience to begin sentences with such terms — only to forget that they have not yet stated the principal subject of the sentence. [This warning repeats a point made elsewhere, but I think it is worth making again.] (See **Grammar - Chapter 5**)

Remember that the common word order (the syntax) of a simple sentence written in English is as follows:

SUBJECT (**the cat**) — VERB (**ate**) — OBJECT (**the goldfish**)

Simple syntax

If you are in any doubt at all, follow this pattern. Something like ninety per cent of all problems which arise from faulty sentence construction are caused by deviating from this model. This might seem like ridiculously elementary advice, but this syntactical structure is something which operates at a very deep level in the language we use.

Remember that speech and writing are two different systems of communication. In any formal writing, avoid the use of a casual or conversational manner, and do not simply string together clauses which are grammatically unrelated (as is quite permissible in speech). A casual manner encourages weak style, as in *We were caught in the rain, it didn't matter about her any more, we got soaked.* These clauses need to be given some grammatical coherence, as in *We were caught in the rain and got soaked. It did not matter about her any more.*

What follows is an example of a sentence which has too many unrelated clauses, which goes on too long, and which eventually skids out of grammatical control. [It comes from a student essay arguing the case for and against a ban on smoking. Don't imagine that the sentiment is being endorsed!]

> Less smoking would undoubtedly lead to redundancies in the tobacco industry, a consequent rise in the number of unemployed, more people dependent upon State benefits to be supported by a government with subsequently reduced income.

The same arguments can be expressed far more clearly and effectively merely by splitting them up into two separate and shorter sentences. [I have also made one or two minor changes to enhance the sense.]

> Less smoking would undoubtedly lead to redundancies in the tobacco industry and a consequent rise in the number of unemployed. More people would then become dependent upon State benefits, which would have to be paid out by a government with a reduced income.

Clauses

Most problems in sentence construction are caused by two or three closely related factors. The sentence is often too long. One clause is tagged on after another until grammatical contact with its beginning is lost. The sentence very often starts with its verb or object, rather than its subject. It might also start with a conjunction (*although, because*) and in addition there may be very little connexion, in terms of grammar or subject-matter, between its parts. Here is an example which illustrates a number of these problems:

> Although the weather was appalling, with arctic temperatures, a howling blizzard whipping against the frozen branches of the trees, and a solid sheet of sleet-covered ice over all the roads, which made it difficult to keep upright.

The qualities of a good sentence are not only created by its length. There should also be coherence and unity in its parts. That is, no matter how many grammatical items it contains, they should all be related to the principal subject or the main thought the sentence is intended to convey. [This is rather like the structure of a paragraph, but in miniature.] It is perfectly reasonable to write *I put a cheque for £20.00 in the post yesterday,*

and I hope you received it safely because the second clause is related to the first. However, it would not make good sense to write *I put a cheque for £20.00 in the post yesterday, and the dog has got ringworm again* because there is no logical connexion between the cheque and the dog's illness.

The parts of the sentence should have some connexion with each other, and they should also be arranged in a manner which is logical and 'balanced'. Balance is a stylistic device in which the expression of thought is made similar in form, as in this well-known epithet of Francis Bacon [the writer, not the painter]: *Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; writing an exact man.* Badly arranged parts produce sentences such as *A piano is offered for sale by a woman with carved mahogany legs.* The legs belong to the piano, not the woman, and the sentence might better be arranged *A woman offers for sale a piano with carved mahogany legs.*

Many problems are caused by sentences which are too long, but try to avoid writing in a succession of very short sentences. This creates an effect which is choppy and unsettling. *We shall be leaving tomorrow. We hope the train is on time. My brother is coming too. You know him. You met him last week. He will bring his tennis racket.* However, this is a matter of good style: at least there are no grammatical mistakes here. It should be said that more people get into trouble with over-long sentences than fall into this trap of jerky brevity.

Keep it simple

Even if they are well-composed, avoid tiring your readers by using too many long sentences. Some forms of official documentation may require this style as part of their procedures. Submissions for planning permission, or applications for European Commission funding may even specify the manner in which documents are to be written and presented. However, for communication with a general unspecified public, a more attractive effect will be created by variations in sentence length. This is also closely allied to creating a friendly and pleasing tone.

Most forms of writing can be made more attractive by varying the length of sentences used. The following example quotes the opening lines of an essay by E M Forster with the elegant title 'The C Minor of That Life'. Notice how the variation in sentence length helps to create the impression of someone talking to us.

> Does 'Three Blind Mice' sound different when it is played in different keys? I ask for first aid on this problem. Of course if it is played high up it will sound different from when it is played low down; the mice will squeak more shrilly. But that is not my problem. And, of course, if it is played first in one key and then in another, it will sound different the second time, owing to the relation between the keys; the mice will seem increasingly insolent, or increasingly pathetic. But that again is not my problem.

Very long sentences are sometimes a feature of distinguished prose fiction. Authors as diverse as Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, and Marcel Proust are famous for their fluent and extended constructions which reflect the complexities of thought and feeling they are trying to explore. Perhaps the most famous of all is Henry James: this is from his novel *The Wings of the Dove*. [Don't worry if you feel that you've lost the point before you are half way through the sentence: Henry James is very much an acquired taste.]

> Lord Mark looked at her to-day in particular as if to wring from her a confession that she had originally done him injustice; and he was entitled to whatever there might be in it of advantage or merit that his intention really in a manner took effect: he cared about something, after all, sufficiently to make her feel absurdly as if she were confessing — all the while it was quite the case that neither justice nor injustice was what had been in question between them.

8 Vocabulary

Vocabulary

English is an amazingly rich language. *The Oxford English Dictionary* has over half a million entries — though most people get by with a basic vocabulary of around three or four thousand words. The reason that this resource is so enormous is that we have drawn words from many different languages and added them to our original Anglo-Saxon stock. One result is that we sometimes have a number of terms for the same thing, all with slightly different meanings (which sometimes annoys those trying to learn English). The word for a *home* in English might easily be *house, dwelling, household,* or *abode* — yet each of these words has slightly different connotations.

Having a wide selection of words at your disposal is a very valuable communication skill. The ability to choose the most effective word for each occasion will improve the power and the flexibility of your writing. Many people imagine that they could improve their writing skills if only they had a larger vocabulary. However, there is more to writing well than just being in possession of a large word-stock.

Most people have a large enough lexicon [collection of words] for the majority of their everyday needs. What they probably lack is regular practice in using their existing vocabulary in a thoughtful and precise manner. You can sharpen the tools of your vocabulary simply by taking more care in your choice of words. It is clarity and careful selection which is often required, not just the learning of new terms.

Context is important

It is possibly a mistake to imagine that you can add to your vocabulary by following the *Readers' Digest* 'Improve your Word-Power!' approach. Looking up the meaning of words in isolation from each other is not the best way of enriching your linguistic database. This is because the nuances of words are not easily accessible when they are seen out of a context. In order to reveal its meaning(s), a word needs to be seen doing its work alongside others, in a particular setting.

This is why you should check the meaning of a word you don't know *when you come across it in print*. This is a good habit to acquire. Turn to the dictionary, and look up the meaning of the word. Then go back to the statement in which it is being used, and you will appreciate its meaning *in context*. Next time you come across the same word, the context might be very slightly different. This will deepen your perspective on the meaning of the word. You might see that it has an additional nuance, and the value of the word is thus enriched.

Probably the best way of extending your vocabulary is to read as much good quality writing as possible. Go to the work of those writers well known for their style and their love of language — Jane Austen, the Brontës, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, E M Forster, and Evelyn Waugh. Amongst more contemporary writers who are recognised as lovers of language are Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, and Anita Brookner. Outside the world of novelists, you could read the work of [say] the art critic and social historian Robert Hughes, the neurologist Oliver Sacks, or the cultural historian Marina Warner.

Many words are commonly mis-used — and sometimes they come to have a 'new' meaning which people attribute to them. The problem with this is that the 'old' meaning can be obscured. This is happening just at the moment to *decimate*, which means *to reduce by one tenth.* [It comes from the Roman military practice of killing every tenth soldier to quell a mutiny.] It does not mean to destroy something completely. The same is happening to *aggravate*, which means *to make a condition worse,* not to annoy someone or act aggressively. Many people use the term *sarcastic* when they probably mean *ironic*. *Sarcastic* is used of bitter remarks which are deliberately intended to wound, whereas *irony* is merely saying one thing whilst meaning something else, often for humorous effect.

These issues help to fill newspapers with letters of complaint from Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells. The problem is that language is ultimately very democratic: if enough people decide to use *aggravation* as a synonym for *aggression* [possibly because it begins with the same four letters] then

it will come to have that additional meaning. However, we don't need to roll over on our backs and accept this. Those who wish to use language with sensitivity and accuracy will make a distinction between these two terms, and will thereby extend their personal lexicon instead of reducing it.

You will certainly improve your writing skills by learning to use words accurately and precisely. But this doesn't mean that you should learn the meanings of obscure words and then try to work them into your writing so as to impress your readers. This can easily appear pretentious, and it is likely to disrupt the tone of your normal style. Just taking extra care and being exact will have a far more beneficial effect on your written style.

There are a number of common problems associated with the vocabulary people use when writing. You will see that some of these problems arise from importing the habits of the spoken word into writing. I have mentioned before, but it is worth saying yet again that the spoken and the written language are two different things. Very few people speak precisely, grammatically, and in complete 'sentences'. We tolerate all sorts of license in verbal [more accurately, oral] communication, but we expect the printed word to be exact.

Jargon

Jargon is defined as 'the technical language of a profession or group'. The implication is that some of the terms used by the people within the group are not usually intelligible to others outside it. When solicitors use terms such as *probate, conveyance,* and *leasehold,* they are using the jargon of their profession which in general is only understood by other solicitors. Similarly, one computer user might speak to another about *default settings, Random Access Memory,* and *font kerning* whilst others wouldn't have a clue what they were talking about. Similar examples could be given for doctors, engineers, and even bookmakers.

Academic discussion has a lot of its own jargon too, depending upon the subject in question. Terms such as *hegemony* (political philosophy) *discourse analysis* (linguistics) and *objective correlative* (literary studies) would not be recognisable by an everyday reader, though they might be understood by someone studying the same subject.

There is nothing wrong when jargon is used amongst members of the same group for communicating with each other. Such language often functions as a sort of shorthand which eliminates the need for lengthy explanations. The foreman in a garage does not need to write on a mechanic's worksheet: *Regulate the device which provides a constant supply of petrol to the inlet manifold of the engine.* He just writes *Adjust the carburettor* (or even *Fix the carb*). There is no need to do otherwise, because the communication is between two members of the same group. The purpose, form, and the audience for the communication are all known.

Some forms of jargon eventually pass into general use and enrich the stock of language at our disposal. This happens when what was once a specialist term becomes popular, or when an idiomatic phrase is fairly self-explanatory and seems useful to others. This is true of expressions such as own-goal from football, *repression* from psychoanalysis, and *downloading* from computer technology [It's on its way; believe me]. Many linguistic items now in common use were once jargon.

However, the use of specialist terms should be carefully monitored when communicating outside a group. Many people are so accustomed to their own forms of jargon, they forget that the terms they use may be unknown to the public in general. Keep your audience in mind whilst writing, and check yourself with questions such as 'Will they understand this term? Is my writing pitched at the right level?' Remember that your writing will be understood by a wider audience if it is kept clear and straightforward.

Whatever the jargon of your own discipline, it should be used with precision, accuracy, and above all restraint. Only use the specialised terms of your subject if you are quite sure of their meaning. You should also be quite sure that you are writing for an audience which will understand your specialist idioms. If there is any doubt, translate them into commonly-used terms.

Do not use a jargon term where perfectly ordinary terms will be just as effective. In most forms of public writing, there would be no virtue in using an expression such as *aerated beverages* instead of *fizzy drinks*. Similarly, do not take on half-understood jargon from one discipline and import it into another. A statement such as *We get the government we deserve — and all its hegemonic power* looks pretentious and awkward.

Synonyms

The English language is rich in words which appear to have the same meaning, but which often have subtle differences of meaning. These are called synonyms: words such as *strong* and *powerful*, which are offered as being synonymous by my word-processor. But someone could exercise a great deal of social power without being physically strong. Conversely, someone else could be immensely strong physically, yet have no social power at all. To go back to our earlier examples, even though they appear to describe the same thing, the term *home* carries very warm and positive connotations, whilst in English *dwelling* sounds rather humble, maybe even poor.

There are some people who argue that whilst these subtleties of distinction exist, no two words are truly synonymous. They suggest that if two words had exactly the same meaning, there would be no need for one of them to exist. And they have a point — though I wonder why we have retained in the language both *flammable* and *inflammable*, which appear to be opposites but in fact mean the same thing? [Answers to the OED, please.]

Abstraction

We use the term 'concrete' to describe things which are specific, tangible, and real. Terms such as *book, table,* and *chair* describe items about which there is not likely to be any doubt. But 'abstractions' are terms such as *position, situation,* and *condition* which are far more vague and ill-defined. Without being too dogmatic about guidance on this issue, it is generally better to choose concrete terms whenever possible. *The book is on the table* is far more vivid and immediate than *The book is in an interesting position*. An expression such as *Considerable savings* is vague and unspecific, whereas *Save £500 per month* is concrete and direct.

Situation is currently one of the most over-used and abused of these abstract terms, particularly in the spoken language. Union leaders, football managers, and public relations spokespersons alike will speak of *an on-going strike situation, a no-win situation,* and even *We may now be entering a war situation.* Examples like these should be an effective warning, but remember that although such terms might just be forgivable [though risible] in the spoken word, they will make a bad impression if written down.

Exaggeration

In conversation we often use exaggeration [technical name, *hyperbole*] to produce a vivid or dramatic effect. We might say *I am sick to death of it,* or *I've told you a million times*. This usage is acceptable in speech, but it should be avoided in most forms of writing. The effect is one of casualness and informality which will not be appropriate if you wish to make a serious impression. Besides which, you will notice that such expressions have also become clichés.

Tautology

This is the technical term for 'unnecessary repetition', which should obviously be avoided. There is no purpose served in saying something twice, and to do so gives the impression that the writer is not paying attention. A statement such as *He declined to accept our offer fails* to recognise that 'to decline' something *means* not to accept it. The statement can simply be written *He declined our offer*. Similar cases of unnecessary repetition occur in expressions such as true facts, link together, and proceed onward.

Cliché

This is a brief phrase or a combination of words which may have once had a striking effect, but which now seems tired from over-use. Clichés circulate in the spoken language very readily, precisely because they save people having to think. When written down they appear even more tired and vacuous than when spoken. Traditional examples are expressions such as *it takes the biscuit...back to square one...a taste of his own medicine.* Current saloon bar [or committee room] favourites include *the bottom line is...a whole different ball game...living in the real world...a level playing field... moving the goalposts.*

George Orwell's rule for dealing with cliché was as follows: 'Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.' This requires vigilance, because these expressions may often seem to be just what you require to make an effect. They do the trick. They hit the nail on the head. They're just what the doctor ordered. [See what I mean?]

Euphemism

This term describes the use of a mild and polite term for something which would normally be harsh, blunt, or (considered) impolite. These might be acceptable in conversation (using *passed away* instead of *died* when speaking to someone recently-bereaved, for instance) but you should avoid them in writing. In its most dangerous form euphemism is used as a subtle rhetorical device to evade responsibility or avoid admitting to an unpalatable truth. Recent examples from public life include *friendly fire* (killing your own troops) *restructuring* or *downsizing* (sacking workers) *economical with the truth* (misrepresentation — almost to the point of lying) *and ethnic cleansing* (religious mass-murder).

9 Paragraphs

Paragraphs

If writing were to be printed on the page continuously, without breaks (as it once was in early Medieval texts) we would become very tired when reading. Have a look at the small print at the end of a financial contract if you don't believe me. It would also be difficult to identify the separate topics being discussed. For this reason, and to give ourselves a mental 'breather' whilst reading, we have paragraphs.

A paragraph indicates that a new topic is going to be discussed, and we are normally offered a visual pause before a new one begins. This is done either by indenting the first line, or [as I am doing here] by creating an extra space between the lines. If punctuation marks such as the comma or semicolon indicate pauses within sentences, paragraphs mark pauses within sections or chapters — just as chapters represent pauses and new subjects within a longer work such as a book.

Definition

The purpose then, and the definition of a paragraph is that it deals with just one topic or major point of interest. It represents a unit of thought, and the fact that the sentences within the paragraph all relate to the same topic give it unity and coherence. We read and digest this topic, and are then offered a mental break before moving onto the next.

What determines the subject or topic of the paragraph? This will depend entirely upon the writer's purpose. It can be almost anything. If the objective was to give a narrative of events, then each separate stage might warrant its own paragraph. In the simple story of a journey for instance, these might be (1) Preparation, (2) Departure, (3) Incidents en route, and (4) Arrival. If the writing was a polemical argument or a newspaper article debating some controversial issue, then each paragraph would deal with a separate aspect of the issue. If this was government policy on housing, these might be (1) Social security payments, (2) Building subsidies, (3) Local authority practices, (4) Changes to family structure, and so on. Each is a separate topic, but they are all being discussed in relation to government policy.

The topic sentence

The structure of a well organised paragraph often follows a pattern in which the topic or argument is normally announced in the opening sentence (which is sometimes called a topic sentence). The sentences which immediately follow this *topic sentence* should expand and develop the idea, explaining its significance and its relationship to the subject. This is particularly true in writing such as academic essays and journalism, where tight structure and coherence are conventions of the discipline.

This opening statement and amplification might then be followed by evidence to support the point being made. You would normally provide illustrative examples which are discussed as an explanation of the central idea. The issue is being examined in further detail. What follows is an example taken from an academic essay written in response to the question *Discuss the case for and against political censorship of the media.* It should be fairly clear from the structure of this paragraph that the writer is setting out the arguments against censorship. Each one of the statements made would form its own topic sentence in the paragraphs which followed.

> The arguments *against* political censorship however can be made on grounds which are just as firm. The *moral* arguments usually centre on notions of 'freedom of information' and the individual's 'right to know'. The *legal* arguments point to inconsistencies in current regulations as applied to the various forms of media (books, television, newspapers) and to differences in the law between the UK and other western countries. There are also a number of *social* and *political* arguments ranging from objections of class bias in the composition of those bodies which frame regulations, to similar objections to the ownership and control of the various forms of media. Exploring each one of these arguments in turn, it is possible to see that the case *against* political censorship can be just as strong.

The following is an example of a typical attention-grabbing opening paragraph. It comes from a public lecture which the novelist E.M. Forster gave on the poet John Skelton. Notice that the subject is immediately announced, then a little elaboration is added, before the paragraph ends with a statement which signals what is to come.

> JOHN SKELTON was an East Anglian; he was a poet, also a clergyman, and he was extremely strange. Partly strange because the age in which he flourished — that of the early Tudors — is remote from us, and difficult to interpret. But he was also a strange creature personally, and whatever you think of him when we've finished — and you will possibly think badly of him — you will agree that we have been in contact with someone unusual.

Connections

How long should a paragraph be? In most forms of *popular* writing, paragraphs are normally between 50 words minimum and 200 words maximum in length. They might be longer if you were explaining a topic in considerable detail. The more intellectually demanding the subject-matter, the longer the paragraphs are likely to be. Rather like variations in sentence-length, paragraph-length variety can be used to give rhythm and 'pace' to a piece of writing.

The last sentence of a paragraph is often used to round off consideration of the topic in some way. It *may* also contain a statement which links it to (or acts as an appetizer for) the one which comes next. If you can do this successfully, it gives your reader the reassurance that you are in control of your material. It will also help to sustain the reader's interest.

Consecutive paragraphs *may* sometimes be linked with terms such as 'However' and 'On the other hand' so as to provide a sense of continuity in what you have to say. If you are in any doubt however, let them stand separately and speak for themselves. This is a device which is useful for beginners, but if it is done too often the result can appear rather mechanical.

Paragraph structure

The recommended organisation of a typical paragraph in formal writing is therefore rather like a smaller version of what might be the overall structure of a longer piece of work.

- The opening topic sentence
- A fuller explanation of the topic sentence
- Supporting sentences which explain its significance
- The discussion of examples or evidence
- A concluding sentence

The ability to construct good paragraphs demonstrates that you are in control of your material. It shows that you are able to see the separate topics under consideration, that you understand their relative importance, and that you are able to deal with them in their relation to the subject in general. It is for this reason that long, undigested blocks of text should be avoided. The reader will quickly become tired, and may have every reason to think 'Where does this point begin and end ... How can I know where we're up to? ... Where is this writer's argument going?'

Similarly, paragraphs which are very short will not allow a point to be developed or explained. It is quite common for inexperienced writers to produce the one or two sentence 'paragraph' which does nothing more than announce an opinion or an observation. They then move onto something else, leaving their point unexamined, failing to explain its significance or relate it to the subject as a whole.

However, the very short paragraph is often used for dramatic effect by novelists and tabloid journalists. The full consideration of a subject is suddenly followed by an abrupt statement which usually aims to make its impact by dramatic brevity. This is a device which should be used with discretion and restraint. Perhaps the most famous instance of this particular literary device comes from the Bible (John 11:35).

> When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled. And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see.
>
> Jesus wept.

Bulleted lists

These suggestions do not apply to a catalogue of short points, or what are called *bulleted lists* [in the jargon of bibliography]. If you wished to quickly enumerate the advantages which a business service had to offer, you might say:

- We offer an efficient and flexible service, closely geared to our customers' requirements.
- Competitive prices. Free estimates produced within two working days, and all costs itemised.
- Rapid turnaround. All work completed within ten days of your order being placed.

It is possible to place the topic sentence at other points in the paragraph — in the middle or towards the end for instance. Indeed, a little variation may be necessary in a longer piece of work, so as to avoid monotony. However, beginners should make sure that they have grasped the basics first. This is the same as most other skills: you can introduce variations and even break the rules — but only when you have mastered them in the first place. The degree of control necessary for these structural variations will come more easily as you gain experience.

Remember that in terms of presentation, if there are no gaps between them, paragraphs have their first line indented. [This is a convention taken from printing.] However, in most forms of writing they will look better if they are separated from each other by a one-and-a-half or double space. In this case no indentation is necessary. (See **Presentation - Chapter 13**).

10 Good style

Good style

What exactly *is* good style? The term can have at least two meanings. It may be a manner of writing which is clear, simple, and efficient in doing its job. This is writing which is working so effectively that we probably don't notice how the communication is taking place. On the other hand, it can mean an individual mode of writing which is making a feature of its own stylistic devices and literary technique. This is writing which we might describe as stylish or even mannered.

Clear style

The first of these definitions might be regarded as 'transparent' good style. The writing is not trying to make an impression: it is effacing itself so that the reader will concentrate on the message. *The Highway Code* is a good example of this.

> When approaching a roundabout, watch out for traffic already on it. Take special care to look out for cyclists or motorcyclists ahead or to the side. Give way to traffic on your right unless road markings indicate otherwise; but keep moving if the way is clear. At some junctions there may be more than one roundabout. At each, apply the normal rules for roundabouts. Keep a special look out for the "Give Way" lines.

If we go back to the considerations discussed in *Audience, form & function*, this writing is addressed to a general audience. It is speaking to ordinary people in terms which the majority of them will understand. In form it is a numbered paragraph which is dealing with one topic (what to do when approaching a roundabout). Its function is to inform and instruct readers.

This is writing which makes its points as simply and clearly as possible. There is no superfluous verbiage or decoration. The vocabulary is that of everyday life, and in manner it is speaking directly to the reader without trying to make a good impression or draw attention to itself in any way.

The second notion of good style carries with it the idea that the author is making a deliberate attempt to impress readers. This is the type of 'fine writing' which we often encounter in outstanding essayists and novelists.

Poetic style

The Russian-born novelist Vladimir Nabokov [who latterly wrote in English] had a playful and rather poetic prose style which has been much admired. This is the opening of his famous novel, *Lolita*:

> LOLITA, LIGHT OF MY life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul.
> Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps
> down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

Nabokov's audience is a sophisticated readership of fiction — people who have probably read extensively and are prepared to do some intellectual work in their reading. The form he adopts [though its shape is not 'visible' here] is prose fiction in the novel genre. His function is quite complex: he is seeking to entertain, to 'impress', some would even say 'to show off' [though he would more likely say 'to enchant'].

Good style can be difficult to explain. Many people will admit 'I can't define it, but I can recognise it when I see it'. This is perfectly reasonable, because good style in writing is created by subtle and complex literary effects. Think of the analogous 'good style' in dress. When someone is stylishly dressed we often recognise the fact but can't quite say *why*. It may not just be a question of that person wearing expensive clothes — but that they have been chosen with care and put together in terms of texture, colour, and shape in a way which is elegant and pleasing. [*That's enough clothes.* Ed]

If you are not sure about the style you require for a piece of writing, consult examples produced by professionals. Collect copies of brochures, correspondence, bulletins, newsletters, advertising, reports or any other matter you will be producing. Study them closely. Pick out the examples which seem most attractive or persuasive to *you* as a reader or consumer. You might then try to adopt a similar manner of writing and presentation in your own work. Even if you are not able to analyse the materials technically and say which characteristics are leading you to make your choice, don't worry. Some details of style and presentation are so subtle they work at an almost subliminal level of our consciousness.

Formal style

Pick up as many tips as possible from your close inspection of the materials. Make a note of the vocabulary and the way the writing addresses *you*, the reader. Is it engaging and informal, as a club's newsletter might be, or neutral and objective as you might expect in a government circular? Let's examine a couple of examples, looking closely at the manner they adopt. The first is from a company's annual report.

> The past year has been a further period of strong progress by the Banking Division, building on the foundations laid last year. Profit after provisions more than doubled, increasing by £120 million to £185 million, and confirming the substantial transformation in the performance of the Division during the last two years. This compares with a profit of £50 million last year and a loss of £12 million in 1992.

This is a public document which presents the company's achievement during the previous year for the scrutiny of directors, shareholders, and customers. You can see that this is very formal in style. It adopts a neutral, impersonal tone, which is appropriate for reporting factual information about profits and losses. Expressions of a judgemental nature -*strong progress,* and *substantial transformation* — are made in general and abstract terms. The term *provisions* is obviously a form of jargon in this context. [You might also note that the writing is rather dry and 'correct' — which is one of the reasons not many people would dream of actually reading such annual reports.]

Informal instructions

The next example comes from a manual of instruction for computer users. This is the sort of writing you might expect to be dry and boring, because it is seeking to inform the reader about the stages in a technical process. However, you can see that in the hands of a skilful author it need not be so.

> You are now back at the DOS command prompt, where you were before you started using the Word-Maker program earlier in this chapter. Now is the safe time to turn off your computer or use a different program if you wish. In the next chapter, you'll learn how to retrieve your sample letter and how to make changes and corrections on the screen.

This writing is seeking to create a direct human connexion between author and reader. It is done by addressing the reader directly as *you*. The sentences are fairly short, the manner is conversational (*you'll*) and the reader is being reassured and guided through the stages of instruction by expressions such as *In the next chapter*. [This strikes me as an example of an acceptable form of signposting.]

Fluent style

Skilful writers can sometimes take the aesthetics of good style from one genre and apply it to another. Oliver Sacks has been widely praised for the gracefulness of his scientific writing. A neurophysiologist, his reports on problematic cases are very readable because he expresses himself with an obvious love of language and a concern for the ways in which it can be used.

> Dr P. was a musician of distinction, well-known for many years as a singer, and then, at the local School of Music, as a teacher.
> It was here, in relation to his students, that certain strange problems were first observed. Sometimes a student would present himself, and Dr P. would not recognise him; or, specifically, would not recognise his face. The moment the student spoke he would be recognised by his voice. Such incidents multiplied, causing embarrassment, perplexity, fear — and, sometimes, comedy.

This writing uses a number of classic storytelling devices. Phrases such as *Dr P. was a musician* and It *was here* come from the novelist's repertoire of how to grab a reader's attention by getting straight to the point. Similarly,

expressions such as *certain strange problems* make us want to read on, to learn more. Even though Sacks uses a lot of subordinate clauses, they are well controlled and balanced — as in the first sentence: *well-known... as a singer...as a teacher.* This is elegant, humane, and rather sophisticated writing.

One very important element of good style is that the writing must be appropriate for the task it is performing. The panache of a lively personal letter (*Ready for the latest? Dorothy's having another,* and *Jim's popped his clogs!*) would not be suitable in a business report — just as the formality of the report-writing style we have just seen would not keep readers entertained for very long if it were used in a novel.

It might seem odd, but there is such a thing as 'good style' which actually goes out of fashion. The taste of the general reading public changes with time. It is for this reason that reading old documents can sometimes be quite difficult. We become accustomed to different forms of grammatical construction, syntax, and sentence-length. It might help to reinforce the notion that style is a matter of 'appropriateness' to show that what seemed normal in one historical period does not necessarily appear so in another.

Old-fashioned style

The following example shows that what was considered perfectly normal in a nineteenth century advertisement for a medicinal tonic now seems quaintly and amusingly 'literary'.

> PERRENGTON'S TONIC APERIENT LIQUEUR strengthens the stomach, improves the appetite, prevents flatulence, spasm, giddiness, palpitation, thirst, and disagreeable taste in the mouth; and keeps the bowels gently open, and the body cool. The principles upon which it is compounded, as established by the authority of Dr. Holland, John Hunter, Dr. R. Willis, Dr. Copland, and other eminent physicians, will be found in an interesting TREATISE ON THE STOMACH, which is enclosed (together with full directions) with every bottle of the TONIC APERIENT LIQUEUR. Sold in bottles at 2s.9d. and 4s.6d. at the Central Depot, 44 Gerrard-street, Soho; at 6, Bruton-street, Bond-street, and by all respectable medicine vendors.

Similarly, the novelist George Meredith was once considered a great novelist and was widely respected for his style — though the *Cambridge History of English Literature* admits to an 'oracular allusiveness in Meredith's style [which] appears, on examination, to arise mainly from incidental comment, in which the figurative and aphoristic elements ... abound to such a degree that we often seem to be looking at similes and metaphors instead of the thing which was to have been said'. [Actually, this is not unlike Meredith's own style.] Here is an example from the opening chapter of his novel, *The Egoist*.

> There was an ominously anxious watch of eyes visible and invisible over the infancy of Willoughby, fifth in descent from Simon Patterne, of Patterne Hall, premier of this family, a lawyer, a man of solid acquirements and stout ambition, who well understood the foundation-work of a House, and was endowed with the power of saying No to those first agents of destruction, besieging relatives.

Unless you are in the habit of reading the fiction of this period, a sixty-five word sentence is not easy to understand at first attempt. The length makes for difficulty, as does the fact that it is stuffed with so many dependent clauses.

Modern style

More recently, the American novelist Ernest Hemingway was once very highly regarded as a stylist. He influenced a whole generation of pre-war and post-war writers with what was admired as a prose style of terse, sceptical understatement. It probably now seems rather mannered to many readers, [and Hemingway's literary reputation has dropped like a stone in recent years]. This is the opening paragraph of one of his short stories, 'Up in Michigan'.

> Jim Gilmore came to Hortons Bay from Canada. He bought the blacksmith shop from old man Horton. Jim was short and dark with big moustaches and big hands. He was a good horseshoer and did not look much like a blacksmith even with his leather apron on. He lived upstairs above the blacksmith shop and took his meals at D.J. Smith's.

You can probably see from the historical development of these examples that there has been a general move towards greater simplicity and directness of expression in modern writing. The plain fact is that you will be understood by a greater number of readers if your writing is simple and direct. If you wish to cultivate a style which has dash, colour, and syntactical verve -then you will need to work on being inventive. At this point we are paddling in the shallows of creative artistry.

Tone

One important feature of any writer's style is *tone*. This isn't an easy thing to pin down, because it is composed of so many different aspects of linguistic usage. Basically however, tone is the reflection of the author's attitude or moral outlook, reflected in the work, by the choice of subject, literary devices, and use of language in general. It is an attitude or a manner which readers will pick up whether they are aware of it or not.

And why is it important? Well, because control of tone gives you more purchase over what you write. You will communicate more effectively with your intended readers, and you will have a greater repertoire of effects with which to make your writing more persuasive. It is also important that the tone you adopt is appropriate for the writing task in hand. For most types of writing, it is also important that the tone be consistent. Readers become bewildered by erratic shifts in tone.

Striking the right tone in a piece of writing requires two important skills, both associated with a sensitivity to language and what effective communication means. The first is an appreciation of what is an appropriate tone for the nature of the message and for the particular reader(s) you have in mind. The second is a feeling for the effect of words and their associations, plus the ability to make use of these qualities in the text you produce. An office memo which reads *Could everyone please let me have their reports by the end of the week* is more likely to well-received than *All staff must submit their reports to the departmental head by Friday 18th June.*

Selecting the right tone also requires that you are well acquainted with the form of communication you have chosen. If you are in any doubt, remember this: honesty, clarity and simplicity will always be popular and effective with most readers. In a piece of writing which needs to be more sophisticated however, or which needs to carry a subtle message, you may have to acquaint yourself with the nuances of the medium, and you might have to work hard to produce the required effect. Once again, we are on the outer edges of linguistics and creative writing, so we'll stop there.

11 Drafting

Drafting

The term *drafting* is used to describe the preliminary attempts which are made in creating a piece of writing. A draft might be the provisional version of a document which is available for discussion and revision. Many people write a first draft, tidy up their prose, and then consider the work finished. If you want to develop your writing skills in a serious fashion however, it should mean much more than that.

Drafting is the process whereby a piece of writing can be taken through a *number* of different versions before it is considered finished. There may be many stages of reworking: these might include the deletion of material which is no longer considered relevant, the addition of new ideas, the correction of mistakes, and the rearrangement of paragraphs to produce a firmer and more convincing structure.

Almost all writers will have to produce their own first drafts, but some fortunate people such as journalists and novelists may have the luxury of an editor who will perform the later stages of detailed revision and checking on their behalf. How much effort you put into drafting and editing your work may also be conditioned by the amount of time you have at your disposal.

Multiple drafts

Most people who are not used to writing can bring about *immediate* improvements to their work simply by producing multiple drafts. Throw off the notion that you should be able to produce something satisfactory at one attempt. Professional writers don't work like that: they expect to work and rework their efforts until they get it right. Keep in mind examples such as Tolstoy, who wrote the ending of his famous short story 'The Kreutzer Sonata' twenty-six times before he was satisfied. [Yes, the title *is* taken from Beethoven.]

If you are producing a draft which someone else will correct, or thinking up rough ideas which others will work on, then a preliminary draft may be acceptable. This might be a report prepared by members of a committee, or the first draft of an article you were submitting for someone else's comment. If you are producing your own business letters however, an essay for a tutor, a proposal which will be read as a finished product by somebody else — then take a pride in your final submission.

The important thing is to recognise that good writing simply cannot be produced in one attempt. It is hard to think of any accomplished writing which has not been produced without a lot of sweat and many drafts. Libraries throughout the world are full of authors' manuscripts which prove this. You should be prepared to make several attempts to produce a satisfactory piece of work.

How many drafts? This will depend upon the type of writing and the amount of time you have. If you were writing a casual letter to a friend, drafting would probably be unnecessary. However, if the piece of writing was an application for a job, or a commercial report of some kind, then revisions would be very important. Blemishes in writing are like off-key notes in a piece of music: they may only be brief, but they can create a very bad impression. [Yes, I realise I've used the comparison before, but I hope it will help you to remember the idea.]

How should you produce your first draft(s)? For those writing by hand, one way to save on laborious re-writing is to create very big margins and to double-space your work. This leaves room between each line of text for corrections, and you can write additions or second versions of sentences at the sides (and on the back) of each page. Using this approach, it might be possible to work on your text two or three times before it needs to be written out again. This strategy will be especially useful if you are producing a long piece of work. This same technique will also be suitable for those using typewriters.

What sort of activity goes on when producing drafts? This will depend upon the type of writing task you have before you, but it might include any (or all) of the following:

- thinking about the work
- generating sentences to express your ideas
- fleshing out your arguments
- rearranging words in sentences to create clarity
- eliminating mistakes and making corrections to poor grammar and syntax
- rearranging paragraphs to clarify the structure of an argument or an explication
- finding appropriate vocabulary for the topic or audience
- rewriting paragraphs which are unclear
- deleting any material which is not relevant
- adding new material

Your *first* draft can be written as quickly as possible. You don't need to dwell on details or to correct yourself. Your objective is to create a rough outline which can be used as the basis for further drafts. Don't make the mistake of trying to combine drafting with editing. If you begin to feel bogged down over minor issues, press on despite creating what you might regard as defects. You can come back to remove them later. If it helps, start working on that part of the document which comes most easily to you. This will normally encourage the flow of your writing. There is no rule which says you must write your work in the same order that it will be read.

Thinking time

Most of the emphasis in this book falls on planning your writing. Nevertheless, many people will require time to *think* about what they are going to write. There are very good arguments for letting your subconscious do some work before you actually start on the task. Don't feel guilty if you need to reflect on your subject for a while. The secret is to set limits, so that thinking about your subject doesn't become an excuse for not starting work. Musing can easily become procrastination!

One thing which should be a reassurance to any beginner is that your first efforts do not have to be grammatically sound or even composed of complete, properly finished sentences. The first draft is just that — a rough preliminary version, which is for your eyes only. Writing a first draft is just Making a Start: once you are under way it can even be thrown away if you wish.

Your finished writing will almost certainly be better for having gone through preparatory stages. For every one (extremely rare) example of somebody spoiling their work through rewriting and over-polishing, there are thousands of examples of enhanced fluency, clarification, and improvement. Let's look at those activities of drafting in more detail and consider one or two practical examples.

Generate sentences

For many people, the hardest part of writing is clarifying ideas or thoughts and expressing them in grammatically complete sentences. Imagine you were writing a report. You might know what the events were, but you must translate them into words. What you should keep in mind as an encouragement is that your first sentences do not need to be complete, and they don't need to be already arranged in some tightly ordered form. They can be left incomplete. Come back to finish them later if you wish.

You write the first part of a sentence, but then can't finish it. This is a very common experience. You might make a little effort, but there is no need to go on struggling. Leave it unfinished and move on to something else. You may find that working on another section will throw up new ideas. These sometimes allow you to go back and complete something which has been left unfinished. Don't be frightened of leaving gaps in your writing, and use plenty of paper.

Your first thoughts might be quite sketchy. For a first draft this is perfectly acceptable. Then as you work on the draft you will need to flesh out these statements. You make a claim — but to this you may need to add evidence, examples, and a fuller explanation of what you mean. This is where your draft begins to grow. You might think of further instances to discuss. You might find connexions with other topics, and you might need to show the relationship of what you are discussing to the overall subject. [These paragraphs are themselves an illustration of this process. Each one is an expansion of the statements made in the bulleted list above.]

Rewrite sentences

Your first draft may not be constructed from well-formed and elegantly composed sentences. A perfectly normal part of further drafting is the rewriting of sentences to give them better clarity and shape. You might be rearranging the word order so that the ideas are expressed more succinctly. A sentence such as the following needs some work to sharpen its focus: *Although the notes are only for your own use, they will be more effective if they are recorded clearly and neatly.* The first part of the statement clouds this issue, and the idea is more directly written thus: *Your notes will be more effective if they are recorded clearly and neatly.*

You could be making logical connections or providing grammatical bridges between succeeding statements. You could also be adjusting the tone of your sentences to suit the purpose of your writing — for instance, eliminating conversational items in a piece of work which needed to be formal in tone.

Eliminate mistakes

Don't worry too much about mistakes in your first drafts. They can be eliminated as you go along. The mistakes may be certain words which are repeated too often, words which have been inadvertently misused, split infinitives, dangling participles, or unwanted changes of tense. When you re-read your work, if anything seems awkward or ambiguous, be prepared to make changes. If you are in any doubt about spelling — use your dictionary.

Re-arrange paragraphs

This is normally a late stage of drafting, but it can be done as you go along if you see that something is not quite right. Paragraphs are the commonest large building blocks of most writing. For most extended pieces of writing these need to be arranged in some logical or persuasive order. It is no use having a paragraph which summarises the points you are discussing located in the middle of a piece of work. You may have thought of it at that point when writing your first draft, but now it needs moving to the end [or possibly the beginning as an 'executive summary'].

Similarly, you should be putting other paragraphs in their best order. This is where planning a piece of writing can save you time and effort. If you know the general outline of your work in advance, then the order of its parts will already be clear to you. However, not all writing works like this. Many novelists admit that they are not at all sure what will happen next. Other people work on smaller sections of their writing in isolation from each other — then arrange the results afterwards.

Appropriate vocabulary

Your first draft might be created without any thought for the audience. You might have prepared a first draft 'in your own words'. One part of the drafting process therefore might be 'converting' your text to the language of the readership for which it is intended. This could mean removing jargon, simplifying expressions, and making word changes which render the text in Plain English. If you were writing advertising copy for instance, you must make sure that your audience will be attracted to or comfortable with the language you use. Many people take their own vocabulary and especially their own jargon for granted. Putting yourself in the place of an unknown reader can be intellectually quite taxing.

Re-write paragraphs

The paragraph should have a subtle construction which organises your ideas on a topic. This structural element is not easy to keep in mind as you pile up its individual sentences in the first instance. On re-reading, you might find that your central idea seems to get lost part-way through, or that the paragraph is organised the wrong way round. Take the trouble to move sentences around until they have an effective progression. Be

prepared to experiment. Even if you are writing by hand, it is usually possible to number sentences, re-ordering them with insertion points or alternatives written in the margin.

Delete irrelevance

You may discover that you have notes or observations which turn out to be of secondary importance — or are not really relevant at all. Because writing can be a fairly difficult activity, many people are reluctant to delete anything which has cost them effort to generate. This is understandable: but you should overcome this reluctance. As Samuel Johnson advised: 'Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out'. Even if you believe a phrase or passage is wonderful, it should be deleted if it is not fully relevant. Be bold! More work is spoiled through longwindedness than through undue brevity.

Add material

As you read through your first drafts, you might find that new ideas suddenly spring to mind. You might see a gap which needs to be filled, or you might think of an excellent example with which to illustrate one of your arguments. This is the point at which the new material may be added. Put it in anyway: you can always take it out again later at the next stage of drafting if you change your mind.

12 Editing

Editing

Editing is the final stage of the writing process. It involves the detailed inspection of a text with a view to regularising its spelling, punctuation, grammar, and even typographical layout. In the world of publishing, this stage is called 'proof-reading'. It is the point at which you check that all your details are correct, and you examine the document very closely for internal consistency prior to releasing it into public view.

The degree of editing you need to perform on your writing will obviously depend upon the nature of the communication. Few of us would think of editing a letter to a close friend; but if you are writing for the public you will need to take more care. A manager preparing a sales brochure, or the directors of a company producing an annual report will need to make sure that their work is carefully edited. Any mistakes or infelicities will create a bad impression. Close editing is called for.

In many forms of professional writing the editing may be done by someone other than the original author. Newspaper reporters often have their work 'subbed' (sub-edited) by someone close to the final production process. Book authors too often have their work examined by professional text editors. This is not because reporters and novelists lack writing skills, but because publishers of books and newspapers usually want to control the appearance of work which appears under their imprint.

Attention to details

This sort of editing in fine detail is quite an advanced skill. That is why publishers often employ professional text editors: they do not expect even fairly successful authors to pay such a degree of detailed attention to their texts. [Famous writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf for instance made spelling mistakes in their manuscripts.] However, even though it is an advanced skill, many people can easily improve the quality of writing they release into public by paying closer attention to details. It is a useful skill which is well worth developing.

So, the degree to which your text needs to be closely edited will depend upon the nature of the of writing, as well as the audience for which it is intended. If you are a student producing a coursework essay, your tutor

will welcome finely-tuned work, but if you make a small mistake you will not lose marks. Learning from your errors is after all part of educational process. If on the other hand you are designing a brochure which advertises products for sale, it is very important that all the details are absolutely correct. One digit wrong in a telephone or fax number, and the business will be losing sales [I speak from painful experience]. Similarly, if you were responsible for preparing a company report, the slightest grammatical error would create a very bad impression. What might be tolerated in one form of writing might not in another.

In one sense, the final stages of text-editing are a check to see that you have applied the suggestions made in all the other sections of this book. You are making sure that the text contains no mistakes, and that the writing is presented in a regular and consistent manner. You might wish to first check the more obvious features of spelling, syntax, grammar, and construction. Then the last stage of editing can be devoted to those details of typographical presentation which are commonly the province of a text editor.

Multiple edits

If you are working on a long piece of work it may be less tiring to edit in a series of stages, each one of which is devoted to a different topic. For instance you might first read through the work checking the spelling, then go through it again looking at the layout. A subsequent reading might be devoted to checking any factual details — and so on. Reading through work of any length trying to keep all these issues in mind at the same time requires intense concentration. It is much simpler and less exhausting to deal with one issue at a time.

If you are in any doubt, use the following checklist. Of course if the document is very long, or if you are pressed for time, you may find it necessary to check a number of these items at the same time. A dissertation of 20,000 words or a thesis of 80,000 plus might require this.

Editing checklist

If necessary, check through the appropriate sections of these notes to remind yourself what to look for.

- spelling
- grammatical correctness
- punctuation
- capitalization of names and organisations
- consistency of headings and subheadings
- factual information (names, dates)
- missing words
- presentation (quotations, endnotes)
- consistency of page layout

Example

Here is an extract from a document which has not been carefully edited. Bulleted lists can seem grammatically strange objects. Some people think of them as if they were written as continuous prose: others regard their items as separate grammatical units. This often causes uncertainty regarding punctuation. The problem is that it is very difficult to arrange grammatical logic amongst so many different things. The separate items tend to be regarded as notes rather than clauses. Understandably so, since it imposes an unnecessary strain on readers to expect them to keep the grammatical sequence of events in mind. Here there is a mixture of both systems, which is confusing. The extract is from a university guide on the presentation of research projects. [!]

Poor bulleted list

5. **PRESENTATION**

5.1. **Format for the project:**

- Must be typed;
- Between 10,000 and 14,000 words, excluding tables, diagrams and appendices;
- Typed, double-spaced, on A4 size paper with a margin of 1.5 ins on the left hand side;
- Text, tables and diagrams should appear on one side of the page only;
- All pages, including tables, diagrams and appendices, must be numbered consecutively;
- Two copies of the project should be submitted. One copy will be lodged in the department and the other returned after the examinations.

You can see that the first few lines of this list are punctuated as if they were parts of a continuous sentence, with semicolons placed at the end of each main 'clause'. The problem is that the individual items are a mixture of 'notes' (the first three items) and complete clauses (the latter three). The last item is also expressed as two separate sentences. This is all rather confusing. In the next section of the guide the author has used a combination of notes and clauses again, an irregular mixture of lower case and capital letters to begin each item, and after all this muddled punctuation — no full stop at the end.

Before editing

5.2. **Contents should include:**

- Acknowledgements to all who have helped;
- Table of contents to indicate order and page numbers of chapters which cover:
- an introductory section, outlining the problem to be investigated, relevant literature and plan of project;
- an account of the main study, its design and implementation, the main findings;
- discussion and conclusions;
- an indication of appendices, bibliography

The important thing when editing a bulleted list is to be consistent. The items in it should either be treated as continuous prose, or they should be regarded as separate items. The longer the list, the more difficult the problem becomes. The simplest solution is to acknowledge that the items are in note form, and because of this remove all unnecessary punctuation. (See the discussion of bulleted lists in **Structure**.)

After editing

5.2. **Contents should include:**

- acknowledgements to all who have helped
- a table of contents to indicate order and page numbers of chapters
- an introductory section, outlining the problem to be investigated, relevant literature and plan of project
- an account of the main study, its design and implementation, and the main findings
- discussion and conclusions
- an indication of appendices, and bibliography

13 Presentation

Presentation

The physical presentation of your writing can be very important. Try to develop a good sense of page design, and take care in making your work legible and attractive. The layout of writing has a powerful effect on those who read it, even at an unconscious level. You may be limited to what can be done with the basic materials of a pen and a block of A4 paper, but if you wish to make a good impression, you should take the trouble to set it out in a way which is appealing and persuasive.

When students submit essays to their tutors for instance, they should be aware that good presentation can earn extra marks. Even if tutors are not consciously biased, they often give extra credit for tidy work. This may be bad news for those with poor handwriting — but maybe it can be seen as an incentive to improve. The same is likely to be true for any other sort of documents. Keep in mind the fact that standards of presentation are rising very quickly, due to the increasing use of word-processors.

You might feel that this is rather unjust, but it simply reflects the *authority* which print confers on writing. The published books and documents that we read bear the stamp of the authorial and the editorial processes which have brought them into being. They have been selected for what is perceived as their quality. Other work has been rejected in their favour. The result is that we tend to treat the printed word with a respect which the handwritten word has yet to win.

It is true that a genius could create a masterpiece scrawled on the back of an envelope, but you should not draw false comfort from this observation. Unless you are exceptionally talented and already well known, nobody will take seriously any work which you present in a scrappy or untidy manner.

Page layout

The connection between writing skills and presentation might seem to be no more than a matter of aesthetics — but there is more to it than that. Good page layout requires you to think carefully about the relative importance of each item of your writing, and you must decide the order in which the elements should be arranged. If your presentation can visually reflect

this organisation or structure, what you have to say will be more persuasive. For instance, writing which rambles on and on with few paragraph breaks often reveals the writer's inability to think clearly and organise ideas.

You should also develop a sense of pride in your work. Even if the writing is only for your own use, it will be easier to work with and more pleasant to re-read if it is neatly presented. Treat each piece of writing as a chance to develop these skills. Experiment with the drafts you produce. Exaggerate features such as margin size, line spacing, and the position of the text on the page. This will give you a sense of what effect these have on the character of the work.

If you are not sure how to create good layout, have a close look at professionally produced materials. Collect examples of advertising brochures, catalogues, newsletters, company reports, and even popular glossy magazines. Study the layout and presentation of the writing in them. Notice features such as the special emphasis given to headings, the different levels of sub-headings, and the use of numbered and bulleted lists. Look closely at things such as the use of indentation and spacing. You will probably be surprised by how much blank space surrounds the text in many contemporary documents.

Some forms of writing have their own protocols of layout and presentation. If you are writing a report for instance, it is very likely that you will need to present the information in the same manner as other reports of its kind. You will help yourself by studying these earlier models, checking how the data is laid out on the page. For instance, play scripts for stage, radio or television are laid out in a very idiosyncratic manner, with huge margins and enormous gaps between each separate speech or stage direction. Unless you followed this pattern, nobody receiving your work would take it very seriously.

The physical presentation of your work can play a big part in the overall impression it will make and the way it is received. If you are producing work which will be photocopied for instance, make sure you have the pages numbered and separate. Students submitting essays on the other

hand should keep their pages together. This can be done with a staple or a paperclip in the top left-hand corner. Whatever you do, *don't* fasten pages together with pins: these are a heath hazard to all concerned.

For any work which involves an element of public presentation, use one of the transparent plastic document holders which are now increasingly popular. These are relatively cheap, and they can give a sense of seriousness and dignity to even a fairly modest piece of writing. Alternatively, two pieces of coloured A4 card and a plastic slide binder can transform a clutch of lose pages into something impressive for less than the price of a tabloid newspaper.

Handwriting

If you are submitting your work to someone in handwritten form, write as neatly and legibly as you are able. Do this as a mark of respect both to yourself and your reader (and indeed, the work itself). Submitting work in poor handwriting is either a sort of laziness or arrogance. It seems to be saying *You'll have to put up with this* or *I can't be bothered to do any better.* This is bad manners, and no matter what the quality of the content, you are likely to antagonise your reader.

It is possible to improve your handwriting if you simply take a little more care than usual. Try to regularise your letter-forms [the shape of the letters]. That is, make the letters the same size, and create clear distinctions between them, so that it is possible to see the difference between an o and an a for instance. Even a fairly obscure writing style can be legible so long as the letters are regularly shaped. The reader simply 'learns' how to read your script.

If you know that your handwriting is not very good, and despite efforts to improve it still looks untidy, then you should think about acquiring a typewriter. There couldn't be an easier and cheaper time to buy one, since they are rapidly being displaced by word-processors. Don't imagine that you need a high level of typing skills in order to use one. Many people [including me] type with only two fingers. Even the oldest machine will help you to produce your work in a much better state than by poor handwriting.

Some of the guidelines for good presentation in handwritten work are remarkably simple. Most work looks better if it is written only on one side of a piece of paper. Unless you have been specifically asked to write on both sides, don't do it. This may seem rather extravagant at first, but the people receiving your work are more likely to have their reading task eased. Many publishers insist that all manuscripts submitted to them must have their text double-spaced on one side of the page only. It is also strange but true that those people who write on *both* sides of a page — even when they are numbered — tend to get their pages out of order. [I speak from the experience of twenty-five years as an essay script marker.]

Page margins

Another very simple guideline for improving the appearance of your work is to leave plenty of 'white space' on the page. That is, leave bigger-than-usual margins and gaps between paragraphs. Let your work 'breathe'. Don't try to cram as much as possible onto the page. Many people choose single spacing and create lines of writing which almost reach the edge of the page. The result is a monolithic and daunting mass of text which looks very *un*inviting to the reader. This is a typical beginner's mistake.

Another very simple guideline is to use black ink. Many pens are supplied with blue ink, but black ink against white paper is always more legible. In addition, it looks more adult, more professional, and is one small step closer to the appearance of a conventionally printed text. Unless your piece of writing calls for it, avoid the use of coloured inks such as green and mauve: they can easily create a rather frivolous impression. These might seem like trivial issues, but a great deal of good design technique is concerned with paying attention to details.

The same is true of the paper on which you will write. Use conventional writing blocks by all means, but in general avoid those which are ruled with narrow lines. For people with a normal handwriting style, narrow spacing tends to promote a text which is too tightly squashed together. If your work is being passed on to someone else for scrutiny, don't submit it on paper which has pre-punched holes (unless it's a student essay) or which has been torn from a spiral bound notebook. This will do your work no favours at all in terms of presentation.

If you have ever seen the manuscripts of some famous writers (Balzac, Dickens, or James Joyce for instance) you may be tempted to retort — *But their handwriting is* **terrible***! Why can't I get away with it?* There are two answers to this question. First, these people were producing drafts by hand which were then sent to printers for setting in type. What they produced was only an initial stage in the process of bringing their writing to the public. Second, you should not imagine that they were not concerned about the presentation of their work. Almost all of them took a near-fanatical interest in the presentation of their final texts.

Typing

If you are using a typewriter for producing written work, you should employ its facilities to best effect. Follow the same guidelines which also apply for the presentation and page layout of handwritten and word-processed essays. But don't think that the machine will do all the work and decision-making for you.

Many people can improve the appearance of their typed work by using wider page margins than are commonly thought necessary. Set margins of at least one inch and as much as one-and-a-half inches at the edges of the page. This might appear very extravagant at first, but it is likely to produce a good effect. The margins 'frame' your text.

If you are producing a long piece of work — say, a 5,000 word business report — you will probably use single spacing. But if it is simply a 500 word proposal, consider using one-and-a-half or double spacing so as to leave additional space between each line of your text.

Add an extra space between each paragraph. This will help the structure of your work to stand clear. If you follow this arrangement you do not need to indent the first line of each new paragraph. This is only necessary in printed books where the paragraphs are not separated because the printer is trying to get as much text as possible onto each page.

Remember to use underlining to denote the titles of plays, long poems, novels or any texts which are published separately.

Othello Paradise Lost War and Peace The Soviet Era

If you have an electric typewriter which has the facility to produce special effects, these title should be in *italics*.

Use tab stops or any other form of indentation to offset long quotations:

> This is an example of a long quotation which has been highlighted within the text by being indented. You should only do this occasionally, and it is only necessary when the quotation is longer than two lines of your own text.

Believe it or not, untidy typing *is* possible! It is usually the result of using an old machine, a faint ribbon, erratic spacing, and over-typing to correct mistakes. If you are submitting written work to somebody else, make sure it is typed neatly with a minimum of visible corrections.

Depending on the importance of your work, and how public it will be made, mistakes can be eradicated by over-typing, or better still eliminated by using correction fluid. If you wish to make your text look attractive however, you should try to minimise the use of these devices. If the work is really important, you might consider producing your own initial drafts, then have the final version re-typed professionally.

Remember to follow the normal conventions of spacing. There should be a *single* space following each punctuation mark, and especially after each full stop, before starting the next sentence. Although it was once thought to be good practice to have two spaces after the end of each sentence, this is no longer considered necessary.

If the print is faint, buy yourself a new ribbon. If the finished work still looks untidy because of mistakes and over-typing, it is possible to improve its appearance with a very simple procedure. First, blank out any mistakes or corrections with correction fluid; then take photocopies of your final pages and submit them instead of the originals.

If you are using an old machine, you will probably find the elimination of mistakes using correction fluids very irritating and time-consuming. Save yourself time and effort by editing the penultimate [last-but-one] draft in *detail* and *by hand* before you type out your final version. This will reduce the problem of corrections to a minimum.

Word-processing

If you are using a word-processor, you have all the facilities you will need for creating good presentation values. A good modern word-processing package (and a good printer) is only a few steps away from professional presentation standards for most amateur purposes. Even older systems will produce pleasing results. [In the world of computers and software however, 'old' can be as little as twelve months. Two or three years can be a 'generation'.]

See the section on **Using computers (Chapter 17)** for detailed advice on their use, but so far as presentation is concerned there are two or three points which are worth emphasising here. For writing which will be read continuously, you should choose a serifed font (such as Times Roman or Garamond) rather than a sans-serif font (such as Arial or Helvetica). This is because it will make your text easier to read. Use the BOLD and ITALIC functions for creating headings and emphasis. *Don't* use continuous capital letters in long headings, *don't* underline for emphasis — and *never* use both. Avoid producing single isolated lines at the end or the beginning of a page.

14 Writing strategies

Writing strategies

The general writing strategy proposed in these guidance notes is recommended to anybody still gaining experience. Emphasis is placed firmly upon making detailed plans before starting a writing task, then producing multiple drafts, followed by extensive revision of what is written. It will be a suitable approach for almost all writing assignments.

However, other techniques of composition *do* exist, and may even be appropriate for different subjects and tasks. They might also suit those who are not at ease with detailed planning. Some people are more comfortable with approaches which involve the collection of data, improvisation, or the gradual generation of a work.

It should also be said that each stage of the pre-writing phase may be punctuated by any amount of *thinking*. Some people make rough notes first, then put them on one side. Meanwhile, they might be thinking about what they are going to write — either consciously or unconsciously. There are many well-known instances of authors who commit to paper nothing more than an image or the scrap of an idea. By fixing it in this way however, they have also registered it imaginatively. Some time later, often without any conscious effort on their part, they find that the image or the scrap has expanded and developed — like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis.

Unplanned writing

It is also true that some people are more at ease with *un*planned writing. They like to see what emerges during the process. They find that one idea sparks off others as it is written down on the page. Too much planning might give them the feeling that their possibilities have been hemmed in, that their plan acts as a straightjacket rather than a foundation on which to build. It is difficult to imagine many lyric poets working to tight plans for instance. Novelists too often report that they let their writing go in whichever direction seems dictated by the story, not by their own conscious wishes.

You might try some of these alternative strategies for yourself. It is certainly true that there is no *right* or *wrong* way to produce a piece of writing. [The Russian poet Ozip Mandelstam didn't even write his poems down. He memorized them, and other people wrote down what he recited.] But keep in mind that these are not offered as easy solutions. Writing is hard work for most people, no matter which strategy you use. But here are some approaches you might consider.

Plan — draft — revise

Using this approach, the writer begins by making an outline plan, perhaps listing the headings or topics which need to be covered. The plan might then be revised and fleshed out with more details or background information which will be used in the finished piece of work. There might even be further stages of revision to the plan itself, but eventually it is used as a basis on which to produce a first draft of the work. This first version is then revised and rewritten any number of times. Corrections and alterations are made to the subsequent draft(s) until the final document is produced.

Outline — draft

In this approach the writer creates a list of headings or tabulated subject topics. These follow the same order that they will be arranged in the finished document. Each one of these items is then expanded separately and discussed in turn until the final text is generated. This approach is suitable for those tasks in which the contents are decided by some outside authority, such as a report or the completion of a questionnaire. Computer programmes which assist this approach are called 'outliners'.

Draft — revise

This approach may be suitable for those who prefer to work spontaneously, free from the constraints of detailed planning. The writer sets down a stream of 'first thoughts' and ideas on the page. These may have only glancing relevance to the finished work, but they give the writer a sense that there is something with which to work. The writer may deliberately avoid criticising the quality of what is produced. These first thoughts then form both a rough draft and a source of inspiration for further writing. More work on drafting and revision is then done until the final text is produced.

The polished draft

Sometimes when producing longer pieces of work, there may not be time for creating multiple drafts. In this case the writer may choose to maximise the quality of the first draft so as to cut down on work to be done at a later stage. The preparatory stages of collecting information and planning will have been done. A draft is produced which is as close as possible to the end product. Care will be taken with grammar, word choice, spelling, and sentence construction. All this may not eliminate the necessity for a subsequent draft, but the bulk of the detailed work will have been done.

Expansion

In this popular approach, materials and notes are assembled, then individual items are selected for separate consideration. Each of the notes is gradually expanded until some shape and ideas begin to emerge. This is the opposite of planning. Each separate issue is being explored to see what it might yield. Individual topics might be developed independently so that the writer doesn't feel overwhelmed by the whole writing assignment. This is one example of what is sometimes called a 'discovery' approach to writing.

Cut and paste

This approach is one of collection and assembly. The writer gathers together a variety of materials related to what will be the end product. These can come from a variety of sources. They might be notes, quotations, fragments of earlier writing, extracts from other people's work, or materials which might just act as prompts or sources of ideas. The materials are then moved around and organised until they fit the current writing task. The resulting collage may be used as a plan or a rough draft on which the finished piece of work will be based.

Improvise

It is well known that many novelists and poets start writing with nothing more in mind than an image, a character, or the fragment of a story. The American writer William Faulkner started his novel *The Sound and the Fury* with nothing more than 'the picture of the muddy set of a little girl's drawers in a pear-tree where she could see through a window where her grandmother's funeral was taking place'. Such writers follow their instinct and their imagination, very often don't know what will happen next, and sometimes even find that ideas come to them unannounced, seemingly from nowhere. Of course you need talent and a rich creative streak to be able to work this way — but as a writing strategy it illustrates the fact that the human mind can sometimes work at an unconscious level. It is one of the happier creative experiences available to most people that when writing about one thing, ideas for another can sometimes spring into mind with no pre-planning.

Collaborative writing

There are some writing tasks which call for multiple authorship. Many scientific research papers are produced in this way, and any large-scale writing assignment which needs to be produced quickly might well require the contributions of a number of people. This is rather a specialised form of writing. One academic expert on the subject describes the three principal strategies as "sequential, parallel, and reciprocal" writing. In a sequential process one writer starts off the writing task and then passes on the result to the next, who adds to it, and so on. In a parallel process the writing is split into sub-tasks and shared out amongst the writers, who send their products to each other or to an editor. In a reciprocal process all the writers work together simultaneously on the writing task, keeping a central file containing the draft text.

15 Structure

Structure

Structure (or *construction*) in a piece of writing is a term used to describe the arrangement of its parts. It is 'the internal shape' or 'the relationship of the parts to the whole'. In many forms of casual writing this may be something which most people don't give a lot of attention. However, the ability to perceive and to create good structure is a very valuable writing skill. If you can create coherence and a persuasive or satisfying sense of 'architecture' in a piece of writing you will enhance its effect on the reader.

Beginning, Middle, and End is a description of a very simple form of structure. If you were writing to a friend your letter might be arranged — *Dear Frieda, It was very nice to hear from you after ... This is what happened on our holidays ... Let's meet in town next week to ... Best wishes, Marge.* You offer introductory remarks, then the substance of the message, and you finish in a conclusion with plans for next week. In something as simple as personal correspondence, you might create this arrangement without even thinking. However, the issue becomes more difficult if a piece of work is longer or more complex. This might be true of a report, a newsletter, or a novel.

Creating structure is a feature of writing many people find rather difficult — and with good reason, because it is a subtle and complex exercise. You might be trying to give shape to material which has no obvious or discernable form. Imagine that you were asked to create a publicity brochure for your home town. Where would you start? What order would you create for the best arrangement of its elements? There are no right and wrong answers to these questions. You must choose something which looks persuasive, attractive, or logical — depending on the purpose of the brochure.

If this document was meant to attract tourists, you might concentrate on all the town's most appealing features with historical interest. On the other hand, if it was designed to attract industrial investment, you might feature available building land or the town's proximity to its nearest airport and motorway links. You can see from this that the *purpose* and the *audience* for the writing have a bearing on the structure it will be given.

One of the most common problems for many writers is 'not being able to see the wood for the trees'. That is, you are so concerned with the *details* of writing that it is not easy to keep any overall shape or design in mind. You are at ground level, generating your text, thinking up ideas, and wondering what to write next. At this stage it is not easy to rise above your work to look at the pattern required to keep it all in order. [This is one very good reason for thinking about the structure of a piece of work *before* you start writing.]

Ultimately, creating structure is quite a sophisticated skill, because it requires that you have experience and an understanding of the *form* of the writing you are producing. However, there are a number of general guidelines you might follow. What we will do here is look at some guidelines on introductions, offer suggestions for dealing with the body of the material, then look at conclusions. If you are still uncertain about the concept of structure, I would suggest that you read the section on Essay writing.

Introductions

Openings

The opening of a piece of work should normally introduce the subject in question. Depending on the type of writing, this might be done by addressing the topic head on, or by grabbing your readers' attention with some remark which will lead them to wonder what comes next. Introductions which are direct and clear usually signal work in which the following parts will be well organised. If it is possible to begin with some sort of pithy remark, this can act as both a summary of the topic and as an inducement to read on. The French essayist Montaigne for instance begins one of his meditations with the following remark: *Cicero says that philosophising is nothing more than preparing for death.* Doesn't that make you want to know what comes next?

Definitions

Introductions which begin with definitions of what you are going to discuss may seem worthy, but they are nearly always boring to read. Don't start with *The dictionary definition of ... is ....* Unless you are dealing with a type of writing which specifically calls for a discussion of the terms to be used, avoid long-winded 'definitions'. Some writing tasks might require you to do this: an essay in philosophy for example often necessitate a clarification of the concepts being used. In most forms of writing however, you should not need to debate terms. Your understanding of the subject should become clear from your discussion as it progresses.

Difficulty

Even if you think the subject is especially difficult, you should avoid saying so as part of an introduction. This can create the impression that you are making excuses in advance. [Students often adopt this strategy, hoping to forestall their tutors' expectations.] You might however wish to *name* or *outline* the difficulties, or make an attempt to clarify them — so long as you go on to tackle them. [If you are a student, remember that questions are set to pose difficulties: your task is to answer them.]

Restatement

If you are writing in response to a question (as in an essay assignment) it is not a good idea to restate the question in your introduction. If possible you should even avoid using the same terms as those in which it is set. It is much better to translate it into your own terms — paraphrasing it as a demonstration that you understand what it calls for.

Approach

An introduction should make clear the particular approach you intend to take. However, try to avoid giving elaborate direction indicators with expressions such as 'First I will be discussing ... then later I will go on to consider...'. [This is called 'signposting'.] A good piece of writing should speak for itself, making clear the approach you have chosen as your discussion progresses.

Proportion

Unless there is good reason for a lengthy preamble, introductions should not usually constitute more than five to ten percent of the total length of a piece of work. Any more than this may be taking too long to get to the point.

Directness

If in doubt, you should go straight to the subject you wish to discuss. Some people argue that no introduction at all is often preferable to one which is vague or uncertain. If all your observations are directly relevant to the subject, your approach to it will quickly become apparent.

Sample introduction

This is a reasonably good introduction to an essay in philosophy at first year undergraduate level. The question posed was '*Are there universals?*'

> Plato was the first to deal comprehensively with the concept of universals, and he did so in such a compelling manner that his ideas still have an influential force today. His general method is to set himself questions (through the mouthpiece of Socrates). He begins The *Republic* by asking 'What is Justice?' and goes on in pursuing this question to ask 'What is the Good?'. This method, it will be seen, somewhat predetermines the nature of his answers.

Strategies

Many people find introductions difficult to write because of the particular writing strategy they adopt. You should not feel bad about this, since striking just the right note in an introduction can be quite difficult:

- You may not have written your piece of work yet, and you are not sure what you are going to say.
- If your argument doesn't yet exist, you may not be sure what you are introducing.
- You may find it difficult to summarise the points you wish to make which exist only in note form.

Solution

The simple solution to this problem is to write the introduction *after* the work has been produced. It will be much easier to introduce your subject after the first draft has been written and you have a grasp of the substance of your overall argument. Get rid of the idea that you must produce your writing in the same order as it will appear on the page. 'The last thing one settles in writing a book is what one should put in first.' (PASCAL *Pensées* 1670)

Contents

If possible, you should try to think through the structure of your work before you start writing. Once you are immersed in the process of generating your text, it may become more difficult to stand back to see its overall shape. If you are trying to create a pattern for your work at the same time as generating its detail, you are also giving yourself an extra writing burden. Do yourself a favour: keep things simple.

If you know which topics you will be covering, take the trouble to arrange them before you begin. Move them around until you find an arrangement which is logical and persuasive. All this can be done in rough note form. Nothing elaborate is required, and you will save yourself time and effort at the writing stage.

Logical order

Try to find a natural and convincing arrangement for the topics you are discussing. For instance, if you are writing a set of instructions, try to put yourself in the position of the person who will be using them — possibly as a raw beginner. The best instruction manuals seem to me those which assume no prior knowledge. They take the reader through easy and logical stages: how to get started, the first steps in making things work, what to do if something goes wrong, graded lessons in using a programme, and so on. All the more complex issues are left until the later pages of the manual. This sort of arrangement makes sense, and gives the reader confidence.

Make sure you know which are the most important elements of what you are going to write about, and which are the minor examples or illustrative details. Readers will feel uncomfortable if you are moving from one to the other with little sense of discrimination. You may wish to alternate for the sake of variety — but you must be firmly in control.

If your subject has any elements of narrative (a story or a historical account of events) you should normally follow chronological order as the basis for structure. That is, deal with the events in the order that they actually occurred. In more sophisticated pieces of work this might seem too naive, and the events may need to be rearranged. A murder story might begin with the discovery of the body, then go back to reveal how it got there. But this should be done with care: it is very easy to lose control.

Imagine your subject was a comparison of different types of retail outlets — local corner shops, chain stores, and supermarkets. If the function of your piece of writing was an economic survey, you might choose to discuss your individual examples in those three separate categories, so that you were comparing like with like. But if you were producing a 'human interest' article for a magazine, you might wish to alternate the categories so that the reader did not become bored. Thus the function of the piece of writing might either determine or give you ideas for the structure of its contents.

Sometimes it is not possible to know in advance what the individual topics of your subject will be. They might be generated as part of the writing process, and therefore you cannot know in advance either their identity or their best arrangement. This will be especially true for those who choose a 'discovery' or improvisatory writing strategy. In such cases you should be prepared to re-draft and rearrange what you produce. Chop up and re-order the elements *after* they have emerged.
(See **Writing strategies - Chapter 14**)

Novel approaches

Novelists provide us with good examples of how form can be given to disparate materials. They are often faced with the difficulty of organising the activities of multiple characters in long novels which have lots of action. How do they do it? Charles Dickens is famous for having kept readers enthralled with the exploits of his characters in weekly magazine instalments. He made detailed plans of what would be happening to each character in each episode. [He was also prepared to change these plans if sales dropped.] The German writer Gunter Grass wrote his most famous novel *The Tin Drum* with sheets of paper pinned up all round the walls of the room in which he worked. These had the various elements of his plot written up in coloured inks.

The common element here is planning. Thinking and organising of ideas is done before a word is written. This is why generating ideas and creating some sort of order is given such emphasis in these notes. It *is* possible to arrive at firm structure by other means, but for most people a fully visualised plan will be the best assistance they can create. (See **Generating Ideas - Chapter 2**)

Headings

One of the most effective ways of giving structure to your work (if the form of writing calls for it) is to use headings and sub-headings. These can provide visual emphasis and a clear sense of order. They also permit readers a quick overview of the work, or the chance to focus on an individual section if necessary. There are a number of simple guidelines you should observe in order to make headings effective.

- Headings should provide clear and informative descriptions of the sections they precede.
- Follow the rules of good page layout to keep sections visually distinct.
- Headings should match the scope of the section they describe, with a clear relationship between the two.
- Heading and sub-heading descriptions should be grammatically parallel to each other.

Bulleted lists

You might also wish to present some of your information in the form of a bulleted list [as I have just done]. This can draw the reader's attention to salient points and highlight what you consider to be most important. They are an increasingly popular feature of business and instructional writing. Once again, there are a few simple guidelines you should keep in mind.

- Limit the number of points you make. The longer the list becomes, the more it will lose its effect.
- Keep each statement as short as possible. Don't bullet long paragraphs.
- Maintain conceptual and grammatical parallelism in the statements which are made.

This last point requires a brief explanation. The points in the list should all be of the same kind. Don't mix direct instructions (Keep statements brief) with observations or illustrative examples (Some sentences go on too long). Moreover, each statement in the list should be given the same syntactical and grammatical form: *Keep statements brief* and *Make your points clearly* have the same structure, whereas *Keep statements brief* and *Clearly made points will help the reader* do not.

Conclusions

Summarise

A good conclusion should draw together all the arguments of a piece of writing into one general statement. This statement should be directly relevant to the subject you have been discussing. The statement offers a rapid summation of the ideas discussed — and if possible adds something extra as a bonus or a fillip to the reader.

Avoid restatement

Try to avoid merely repeating the statements made in your introduction. If you have been responding to someone else's proposition, do not restate the original claim, and if possible avoid using the terms in which it was posed. To do so creates a weak and disappointing effect.

End brightly

Try to end on a crisp and firm note. Experienced writers will often save a telling phrase for this point. Others might finish with an appropriate quotation. It creates a good impression if your conclusion can somehow echo the introduction, but without repeating it. 'Save your best shot for last.'

Abruptness

Do not end abruptly, because this creates an impression of haste and incompleteness. It can easily suggest that you broke off with nothing else to say or that you could not be bothered to complete your work. Keep in mind that a conclusion returns to the original subject.

Raising the level

If possible, you might try to raise the subject to its next higher intellectual level. This can create an impressive effect if it is done well. Relate the topic in question to society in general for instance. You might end by discussing briefly why it is important or what issues it leads on to.

Sample conclusion

This is a good conclusion to an essay in response to the following question: *What is the value of studying the writings of dead men? Is sociology too obsessed with the classics?* The writer is summarising the arguments, drawing conclusions, and offering an answer to the original question.

> The one thing all these thinkers have in common is that they were trying to provide solutions to the problems of human existence. As science rationalised the physical world, so the desire to rationalise human activity became stronger. It may well be that human behaviour is essentially subjective and incapable of being totally understood. This may not be such a bad thing. The implications otherwise are that whole groups of people could be subject to experiments in social engineering. Nevertheless, it seems certain that people will never stop trying to make sense of the often chaotic conditions in which they find themselves. If that is the case, then we ignore history

> at our peril: a refusal to learn from the mistakes of the past can only lead to a repetition of such errors. The great men of sociology's past have at least provided us with some ammunition to protect ourselves against such eventualities.

There is one curious form of conclusion which comes at the beginning of a piece of work. In many forms of modern business reports or proposals, it is common to place the conclusions at the beginning of a document. These might be in the form of recommendations or decisions, and might even be compressed into a bulleted list. The writing which follows it in the body of the document is an examination of the subject and how these conclusions were reached. They may have been placed at the beginning to orient the reader, or to grab the attention of someone who may not have time to read the whole document. This device is sometimes called an 'executive summary'.

16 Writing essays

Writing essays

Writing essays requires a number of intellectual skills. You need to be able to understand information and organise ideas, formulate arguments, create structure, and write in a disciplined manner following the conventions of good presentation. These are quite complex demands. If you can confidently deal with a subject in such a way that results in the production of a well-argued piece of work 1500 to 2000 words in length, then you are well on the way to possessing quite sophisticated writing skills.

They are also 'transferable skills'. That is, you will be able to use them for other purposes. For instance, an academic essay requires that you organise ideas so that a coherent and logical argument is produced. These conceptual or cognitive skills would be just as useful if you were required to make a persuasive speech or arrange the elements of a commercial proposal. You are *creating order* and *generating convincing arguments*.

Of course there are other types of essay written outside the academic world. Popular and serious journalism is occasionally presented in essay form, and there is a genre of sustained prose meditation still alive in the world of literature which is best described by the term 'essay'. Such essays Might be written in an original style or present an interesting point of view. Apart from that however, the skills required to produce them are exactly the same as those described here. Some stylistic flourishes and subjective views might be tolerated in a piece of journalism which would not be appropriate in a piece of academic work, but the procedures for producing them are more or less the same.

For the purposes of this chapter we will simply deal with the typical essay which might be set at any level of further or higher education. You will see that the skills required involve understanding a subject, thinking clearly about it, generating arguments, and organising ideas. Even if your own writing does not include essays, you will see that these procedures are readily adaptable for other forms. A journalist would need these skills, and so would someone writing an annual report or the account of an investigation. Even if you were writing a letter soliciting funds for a charity, you would create a more persuasive piece of work if you had these skills at your disposal.

What makes a good essay

Addresses the topic

No matter how interesting or well written an essay, you will not be given any credit for your efforts unless it answers the question or deals with the topic which was set. This is the most important feature of what makes a good essay: it *must* deal with the subject or the topic(s) posed in the question or its title. This requires that you both understand what a question is asking for and that you follow all its instructions.

Relevance

Each separate point of your argument or discussion should be directly relevant to the subject in question. The relevance of an argument can usually be judged by the relationship of each paragraph to the original question or topic. In good essays the first (topic) sentence of each new paragraph will be firmly anchored to the topic in question.

Clear structure

An essay should be like a good piece of architecture — built on firm foundations to carefully made plans. The points of your argument should be arranged in some form which is logical and persuasive. If you are dealing with a number of issues or topics, the relation between them should be made quite clear. The connections between each part and the original title or question should be evident at every stage of the argument.

Appropriate style

For an academic essay the third person (*he, she,* or *it*) rather than the first person (I) is normally preferred. Very occasional use of *I* may be accepted if a personal opinion has been specifically requested. In scientific essays or reports, you should use the passive voice and past tense (*The solubility of potassium dichromate was measured*) rather than a personal and active voice (*We took the average of six samples*). Essays dealing with historical events are normally written in the past tense. However, in literary studies the contents of a novel or a poem are usually discussed in the present tense.

Audience

You should keep your audience in mind. Try to imagine that you are addressing someone who is intelligent and reasonably, but not necessarily well informed in the subject. Although it is your tutors who will actually read coursework essays, they are written for this imaginary audience. In more advanced work such as dissertations and theses you are writing for the supervisors and examiners who will read them.

Evidence

Academic essays should *not* be composed of just a series of unsupported assertions. You need to provide some evidence to support your arguments — either in the form of factual details, your own reasoning, or the arguments of others. Show that you have a knowledge of the subject you are studying by drawing upon your reading of it or the research you have done to create these arguments.

Accuracy

Remember that your written style should be grammatically accurate. Poor punctuation and sentence construction, mixed tenses, shaky metaphors, and even spelling mistakes will create a bad impression. Always take the trouble to edit your work thoroughly and remove any mistakes or blemishes.

Attribute

If you draw upon the work of others, you should always acknowledge the fact that you are using someone else's ideas. Be honest, and record your sources accurately by using a system of endnotes. Never try to pass off other people's written words as your own. This is a form of intellectual dishonesty which is severely frowned upon in academic circles.

Clarity of thought

One of the hallmarks of a good essay is that it demonstrates clarity of thought. It might reveal an ability to identify different issues and argue them through logically. It should show materials well organised into a coherent structure. It will probably display that you are able to make

important distinctions and insights. These skills may not come easily at first, but with practice it is possible to gain greater clarity through discipline, selection, and planning.

Reading and understanding

Essays are often set to encourage and direct your reading in a subject. If you show that you have read widely and understood your subject thoroughly, you will be demonstrating your competence. The best essays are normally produced by people who have taken the trouble to acquaint themselves both with the set book(s) on a course, and with secondary works of commentary and criticism as well. They will often show evidence of intellectual curiosity which has gone beyond the bounds of what has been prescribed as a minimum by course tutors.

Competence

An essay will normally be rewarded with a good grade if it competently reviews all the well-known arguments in a subject, deals with the issues of the course, answers the question, and reaches a balanced conclusion. Do not imagine that you must be extraordinarily gifted to do well. Obviously if you have something original to say, you will be given credit for it, but the essay assignment is usually an academic exercise, not a test of your creativity or inventiveness.

Originality

However, the highest marks are often given to essays which display some special quality or something extra to what is required. This may be a demonstration of original ideas or an unusual, imaginative approach. Such essays usually stand out because of their freshness and the sense of intellectual excitement they convey. But remember that you are not normally *required* to be original. Your tutors are likely to be perfectly satisfied if you simply answer essay questions in a sensible and competent manner.

The essay writing process

Analyse the question

Make sure that you understand what an essay question or title is asking for, what it is giving you the chance to write about, and what is its central issue. Note carefully any of its key terms and any instructions. Think about the question, turning it over in your mind and discussing it if necessary with fellow students. If you are in any doubt, ask your tutor to explain what is required of you.

Generate ideas

Take a sheet of paper and make a brief note of any topics, ideas, observations, or information from your study material which might be relevant to an answer. Don't copy out chunks of texts. Use brief notes or even one-word triggers. Write down anything you think of at this stage. Your objective is to assemble a stock of potential ideas from which you will pick out the most appropriate. (See **Generating ideas - Chapter 2**)

Choose topics

Take another sheet of paper. Extract from your brainstorm listings all those topics and points of argument which are of greatest relevance to the question and its central issue. At this point, do not worry too much about any order. You are simply picking out the best material. If anything strikes you as quite irrelevant to the subject, throw it out.

Reading

At any stage in the process of planning and writing essays, you will normally be engaged in reading or research to provide the information for your answer. This reading will be more carefully directed if you have narrowed down the topics you need to cover. This is one important purpose of the preliminary work you do in thinking about the issue.

Selection

Selecting items on the strength of their relevance to the question may not always be an easy judgement to make. Keep asking yourself — 'Is this directly related to the subject? Will it answer the question?' You might have two categories of rejection: one like a 'Pending' tray containing items which *might* be used later, another like a dustbin into which the completely unrelated material is thrown for good.

Put topics in order

On yet another sheet of paper, try to put your chosen topics and material in some order. At this stage you should be starting to formulate your basic response to the question. Arrange the points so that they form a persuasive and coherent pattern or argument. Some subjects will lend themselves more easily to the creation of this order than others. In some, such as the appreciation of the arts, there may be no set pattern and one must be created. This is probably the hardest part of essay planning at a conceptual level.

Arrange evidence

Most of the major points in your argument will need to be supported by some sort of evidence. One purpose of the essay task is to show that you have read widely in your subject and considered the opinions of others. In some subjects (say, sociology or the sciences) you will actually need proof to support your arguments. During the process of study you have probably been assembling notes and references for just such a purpose. If not, this is the time to do so. On another sheet of paper you should compile a list of any brief quotations from other sources (together with page references) which will be offered as your evidence.

Material

Don't worry too much if on completion of this stage you have surplus evidence. This is perfectly normal. You have picked out the best from what was available. But you should be a little concerned if you don't have enough. This suggests that you might need to do a little more background reading or engage with the subject once again. (See **Taking notes - Chapter 3**)

Make necessary changes

Whilst you have been engaged in the first stages of planning and reading, new ideas may have come to mind. Alternate evidence may have occurred to you, or the line of your argument may have shifted somewhat. Be prepared at this stage to rearrange your plan so that it incorporates any of these new materials or ideas. Try out different arrangements of your essay topics until you are sure they form the most convincing and logical sequence.

Finalise plan

Most essay plans can be summarised as Introduction — Arguments — Conclusion. State your case as briefly as possible. Next, present the evidence for this case in the body of your essay. Finally, draw together the points of your argument and try to lift them to a higher level in your conclusion. Your final plan might be something like a list of half a dozen to ten major points of argument. Each of these points, together with their supporting evidence, will be expanded to a major paragraph of something around 100-200 words.

First draft

You are now ready to produce the first draft of the essay. Don't imagine that you are supposed to produce an accomplished piece of writing at one sitting. These will be your first thoughts and your initial attempts at answering the question, matching your evidence to what is required. You do not necessarily need to start at the beginning and work towards your conclusion: it may be better to start off where you feel most comfortable. (See **Drafting - Chapter 11**)

Relevance

At all stages of essay writing, you should have the question in mind. Keep asking yourself 'Is this evidence directly related to the topic I have been asked to discuss?' Be prepared to scrap your first attempts and formulate new arguments. This may seem painful, but it will be much easier than scrapping finished essays. An essay with just six relevant points of argument will be more effective than one with ten, four of which are not relevant. The former is more concentrated, the latter more diffuse.

Paragraphs

A good tip on relevance is to check that the opening of each major paragraph is directly related to the question. The first sentence (which is called the 'topic sentence') should be a direct response to what you have been asked. It might be an example to illustrate it, or a major point of your argument on the topic in question. If it is not, something may be wrong. (See **Paragraphs - Chapter 9**)

Revising the draft

Your first draft is the basic material from which you will be building the finished product. You should be prepared to revise it in whatever way is necessary. If it is too short, generate more arguments. If it is too long, cut out the less relevant parts. If it doesn't seem convincing, consider putting its arguments in a different order. You might start to tidy up the grammar and expression at this stage.

Multiple drafts

The number of drafts you make will depend upon the time you have available (and possibly the importance of the piece of work). It is a good study practice to take your work through a number of drafts. In the majority of cases, this will improve the quality of what is produced. (See **Drafting - Chapter 11**)

Editing

Before actually submitting the piece of work, you should take it through at least one stage of rigorous text editing. At this point you are checking the smaller details of your text: checking names, spelling, punctuation, and grammar, then removing any of the small blemishes which might remain. (See **Editing - Chapter 12**)

Other strategies

The general strategy proposed for writing essays in these notes is recommended to anybody in doubt or still gaining experience. However, there are *other* approaches to composition which may be suitable — either for writing tasks in specialist disciplines, or for people who prefer to operate in a different manner. (See **Writing strategies - Chapter 14**)

Preliminary sketches

Some people find that they have to write a short, preliminary version of an essay. This may be to create some sort of foundation on which they then build. Alternatively, it may be to 'discover' the possibilities and limits of the topic [and their own knowledge] by writing down what they know. This approach is encapsulated in the paradox: 'How can I know what I mean until I see what I say?' That is, we sometimes need visualised versions of our first ideas before we can do any conceptual work on them.

Accretion

Another popular approach is one in which course materials and rough notes are brought together, then individual items are selected for consideration. The notes are gradually expanded until some shape and ideas begin to emerge. This is the opposite of planning. Each issue is being explored to see what it might yield. Individual topics may be developed separately so that the writer doesn't feel overwhelmed by the whole essay assignment.

Literary essays

A piece of journalism which is cast in the form of an essay would not be expected to conform to all these stringent requirements of argument, evidence, and proof. In most cases the editors of magazines will be looking for flair, imagination, and good style — as well as evidence that the writer is well-informed on the subject in question. Nevertheless, the people who write such essays are likely to possess the skills outlined in this section.

Sample essay plan & sample essay

What follows on the next page is an outline plan drawn up in note form, responding to the question '*Do you think that depictions of sex and violence in the media should be more heavily censored?*' The plan has been presented on a page of its own so that you may better appreciate its overall design.

This is followed by a sample essay on a different topic. It's an answer to a question from a first year undergraduate course on philosophy - Discuss the problem of personal identity

The essay is followed by the original tutor's comments.

Sample essay plan

Introduction

Sex, violence, and censorship all emotive subjects

Case against censorship

AESTHETIC: inhibits artistic talent, distorts art and truth.
[Dennis Potter–Derek Jarman]

INDIVIDUAL JUDGEMENT: individuals have the right to decide for themselves what they watch or read. Similarly, nobody has the right to make up someone else's mind. [BTA–Press Complaints]

VIOLENCE AND SEX AS CATHARSIS (release from tension): portrayal of these subjects can release tension through this kind of experience at 'second hand'.

VIOLENCE CAN DETER: certain films can show violence which reinforces opposition to it,[*A Clockwork Orange, All Quiet on the Western Front.*]

CENSORSHIP MAKES SEX DIRTY: we are too repressed about this subject, and censorship sustains the harmful mystery which has surrounded us for so long.

POLITICALLY DANGEROUS: Censorship in one area can lead to it being extended to others [political ideas, totalitarianism.]

IMPRACTICAL: Who decides? How is it to be done? Is it not impossible to be 'correct'? Any decision has to be arbitrary.

Case for censorship

SEX IS PRIVATE AND PRECIOUS: it should not be demeaned by representations of it in public. [Mary Whitehouse]

SEX CAN BE OFFENSIVE: some people may find it so and should not have to risk being exposed to what they would find pornographic. [Viewers Assoc.]

CORRUPTION CAN BE PROGRESSIVE: can begin with sex and continue until all 'decent values' are eventually destroyed.

PARTICIPANTS MIGHT BE CORRUPTED: especially true of young children. [James Bolger case.]

VIOLENCE CAN ENCOURAGE IMITATION: by displaying violence — even while condemning it — it can be legitimised and can also encourage imitation amongst a dangerous minority. [*Child's Play.*]

VIOLENCE IS OFTEN GLORIFIED: encourages callous attitudes.

Conclusion

Case against censorship much stronger. No necessary connexion between the two topics.

Sample essay

Students working in the first year of their undergraduate studies are required to show that they are coming to grips with their chosen subject. They are expected to produce well argued responses to essay topics and questions and to show that they are reading the set texts and the secondary literature of criticism and commentary in their subject. They are expected to demonstrate that they are becoming acquainted with the conventions of academic writing and they should be showing an ability to digest and analyse information as well as thinking if possible in an independent and critical manner. The example which follows is from a first year course dealing with an introduction to some of the fundamental issues in philosophy.

Discuss the problem of personal identity

First of all, what exactly is the problem of personal identity? Do we want to identify, define, or merely recognise a person (most usually ourself)? Isaiah Berlin puts the doubt as "we do not feel quite sure what we want a 'theory of the self' to do". But then he offers a starting point: "an account of the criteria by which we judge the truth or falsehood of statements of the form 'A (at time t_2) is the same person as B (at time t_1)'".

This account is usually attempted in one of two ways–as a certain continuity of physical appearance, or as a reliance on memory. This, put crudely, is an attempt to deal with the problems in terms of 'body' or 'mind'. I shall try to show that neither gives a full account and that no account is sufficient which tries to separate the two.

We ourselves commonly give an account of identity on physical grounds when we say that we recognise somebody in the street–that is, on subsequent occasions we establish the identity of that person with reference to his physical appearance. This might work successfully in the majority of cases we are likely to come across, but it cannot be regarded as indubitable for a number of reasons. First of all, that person might or could conceivably change beyond recognition as a result of an accident or some severe illness. He retains the same identity, but the physical features by which we previously recognised

him are now changed. Second, he might have an identical twin. In this case the appearance is the same but we can't use it as an infallible guide to identifying our acquaintance John Thompson because, unknown to us, he has a twin brother Tom.

But even if we discount these two somewhat unlikely considerations there remains the problem of ordinary daily change. We do not retain the same physical appearance throughout our lives. So the problem becomes–Which is the real me, the four foot six version at ten years old or the six foot four version at twenty-five?

On this problem David Hume suggests that we continue to ascribe the same identity to an object or a person when changes to it are produced 'gradually and insensibly' (by which he seems to mean imperceptibly): "the mind, in following the successive changes of the body, feels an easy passage from the surveying its conditions in one moment, to the viewing it in another, and at no time perceives any interruption in its actions. From which continued perception, it ascribes a continued existence and identity to the object."

At this point he is talking about 'objects' rather than people, and he goes on to give the example of a ship which retains its identity even though over a period of time it is completely renewed through frequent repairs. This obviously applies just as well to the human body, so I don't think it would be unfair to extend Hume's observations to people.

But it is, I think, worth making a distinction at this point between the types of change found in 'objects' and 'people'. If for objects we take inanimate matter, then they can only change in a reductive sense–that is, they can only become *less* than what they originally were. Human beings on the other hand can be *defined* by their capacity for growth (even if it is succeeded by a period of decay).

Moreover, there is a similar (if more subtle) distinction to be made between Man and his other 'natural' surroundings. A sapling can *only* grow into a tree, and a foal can *only* become a horse; but man has within himself the possibility of choice. Not only can he choose what *type* of man he is going to become, but no matter what condition he finds himself in he always has the possibility of transcending it (in a mental sense) to become something *more*. (Sartre)

So if man can change mentally (in a radical manner) is it fair, because he has the same physical appearance, to say that he has the same identity? This is to reduce 'identity' merely to the conjunction of physical appearance and a name that is ascribed to it.

A.J. Ayre gives a good refutation of this point with the example of the dead man. Lying in the coffin, embalmed and perhaps artificially preserved, he has the same appearance as the day before when he was alive, but we would no longer say that he had an 'identity'.

The argument could be prolonged at this point on the basis of definitions for the word 'identity'. Obviously Julius Caesar still has an 'identity' even though he has been dead for almost two thousand years; but he no longer has a 'living personality' (which I think must be assumed as at least one important connotation of the concept of identity).

The second possibility is to tackle the problem from the point of view of memory. In this we can appeal both to our own memory and to that of others. If we remember being in Birmingham last October and can have our remembrance verified by that of someone else, then it appears that we have a valid criterion for establishing a continuity of the same being existing in society, which gives a convincing proof of our identity. The flaw in this argument is that both the memories cited are capable of subjective error. We may be mistaken about ourselves, and the other person may be mistaken too.

Another problem associated with the establishment of identity by memory is that of amnesia. If a man suffers a complete blackout of memory, then can he be said to retain the same identity as he had the day before? If we answer 'Yes' then we are again reducing identity to a conjunction of name and physical appearance, because the man without his memories–it can be argued–ceases to be the same person. He cannot be said to possess the same 'living personality' because *part* of that personality was the individual memory he could call upon.

Another reason why memory alone cannot be relied upon as a criterion of establishing identity is that the man suffering from amnesia might readily appear to someone else as the same person he was the day before. Unless we took the trouble to discover the amnesia we would assume that we had recognised him. But would we be recognising the same man? If memory is a necessary part of human identity the answer is 'No'.

On the subject of memory Hume points out that it can be linked with the concept of causation to establish identity:

> "As memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, it is to be considered, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity. Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects which constitute our self or person."

But because there will inevitably be gaps in our memory he goes on to make the distinction that "memory does not so much *produce* as *discover* personal identity, by showing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions."

Having reached this point, Hume gives up: "all the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided." But I would suggest that one of the reasons for his 'failure' (which seems to me admirable in its thoroughness to describe what can *not* be used as criteria) is that he sets out with the intention of finding an identity for the 'self' which is fixed and unchanging. "If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, through the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner."

But all living things *do* change: it is one of the conditions of their existence. People change profoundly during the courses of their lives, and any attempt to establish an 'identity' to fit a particular person must take account of the possibility (if not the fact) of change.

But this doesn't solve the problem of identity; it only suggests that the concept should be more inclusive. What then, if it cannot be determined in terms of Mind or Body, *is* identity?

At this point the problem becomes very closely associated with that of the concept of 'essence'–that identity can be equated, if not with the physical or the intellectual, with that which constitutes the 'essence' of a thing or person. But the concept of essences leads ultimately to similar problems of definition.

What I would suggest, just as a possibility, is that Identity might be equated with the sum of a person's acts. In this case we would be lessening the subjective error of a person identifying himself and reducing the possibility of mistaking his appearance to others. Instead, we have more concrete criteria–what a person *does*, *says*, and *produces*. All this could be taken in summation at any period of the person's life and said to be their identity.

At least this possibility has the virtue of taking the argument out of the realm of what seems to me the completely false division between mind and body suggested by Descartes. A body can no longer exist without a mind than a mind without a body.

Notes

Isaiah Berlin, *The Age of Enlightenment.*
David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* Section VI 'Of Personal Identity'.
A.J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge.*

Tutor comment

This is good on the whole. The basic problems have been grasped and the arguments are dealt with in a succinct and confident manner. Background reading was well used, but page references and full bibliographical details should be added in future. I'm not altogether convinced by the amnesia argument, but in general there is a commendable clarity of thought here–until the end of the essay where the argument concerning the 'sum of a person's acts' begs the question of the identity of the person. But this is a complex issue, and on an introductory course of this kind the important thing is to show that you can understand and grapple with problems rather than come up with answers. Grade - Beta double plus.

17 Using computers

Using computers

Computers and word-processors are now in widespread use for writing of all kinds. The advantages for improved presentation are obvious, and once most people experience the facilities computers offer for editing and rewriting, they often wonder how they ever managed without them. Typewriters become a thing of the past.

If you are just starting to use a word-processor and still producing most of your work writing by hand, you need not feel disadvantaged. The majority of newcomers make the transition to full use of computers in a gradual manner. Keep in mind (as an encouragement) that presentation standards generally are being forced up by word-processors. People are likely to become less and less tolerant of any untidy work they receive.

Don't imagine that use of a computer is somehow cheating or taking unfair advantage. On the contrary, you should make use of any methods available to present your writing as neatly and attractively as possible. The more visually appealing your work, the better the impression it will make on the reader.

Re-write ad infinitum

The principal advantage of the computer is that it will allow you unlimited scope for rewriting and editing. You may start with just a sketchy outline, but to this you can add extra examples, mistakes can be deleted, and paragraphs can be moved around very easily. You are able to build up to the finished product in as many stages as you wish. You can use a number of different approaches to producing your work.
(See **Writing Strategies - Chapter 14**)

At first you will probably feel a strong desire to see what you have written printed out as soon as possible. You key in the text, print the results, then make any corrections or revisions on the print-out in handwriting. This is a perfectly normal procedure, and it's a sort of half-way stage between handwriting and computer writing. Revising on print-outs is quite common for beginners. Most people still like the sensation of a pen or pencil in close contact with paper. This can create a sense of intimacy in the writing process. The process of handwriting is usually left behind in easy stages.

Continue with this practice of revising the text on paper until you feel confident enough to compose directly at the word-processor. For regular users this may be sooner than you imagine. The slog of keying in pages of writing which you have already produced by hand will be a strong incentive to compose and to revise directly at the keyboard.

Your word-processor and printer will produce your work very neatly, but will probably do so by using single line spacing and standard margins of one inch. These are what are called the word-processor's 'default settings'. Even though you are likely to be very pleased by the neatness, take the trouble to learn how to vary the line spacing and how to create larger margins. In this way, you can make your page layout as attractive as possible. You will have more control over the final appearance of your text on the page.

Spelling checkers

If your word-processor has a spell-checker, then use it before you print out your document. Remember that it is unlikely to recognise specialist terms, unusual words, and foreign names such as *Infobahn, mediametrics,* or *Schumacher.* These will not be in the processor's memory. Nor will it recognise any words which have only recently been created — words such as sleaze, Internet, and squiffy. You will have to check the correct spelling of these yourself, as you would any other unusual words. You can usually choose to add any of these words to the dictionary in your word-processor. (See **Spelling - Chapter 6**)

Remember too that a spell-checker will not make any distinction between *They washed their own clothes* and *They washed there own clothes,* because the word *there* is spelt correctly even though it is being used ungrammatically in the second statement. The same would be true of *It is over here* and *It is over hare*, because *hare* exists in its own right as a correctly spelt word. However, if your word-processor has a grammar-checker, it might pick up the fact that a word was being used out of its usual context.

Spelling and grammar-checkers are very useful tools which can help eliminate typing errors and grammatical slips in your writing. Strangely enough though, they're not very popular. This is because many people find it irritating to be pulled up over their syntax and their sentence-length. There are good reasons for using them however. Spell checkers can actually *teach* you to spell more accurately. Many people have a blind spot or a mental block over the spelling of some words. [A checker keeps reminding me that the word *accommodation* has two *c*'s and two *m*'s, and one of these days I might remember the fact.] These checkers can also pick up such common errors as repeated words — as in *going to to the fair.*

Having said that, you should not imagine that spelling and grammar checkers will indicate and correct every possible fault. Each time a problem is highlighted, you will be offered alternative words or grammatical constructions from which to choose. At each point you need to read through your work carefully, making decisions over such matters as possible vagueness, ambiguity, and the removal of clichés. There is still interpretive work to be done.

Text emphasis

Use the *ITALICS* or the **BOLD** facilities of a word processor to indicate the titles of books, plays, operas, and works of art — but remember to be consistent throughout your documents. A.J.P. Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War* is just as acceptable as Margaret Mead's **Coming of Age in Samoa**. Follow the conventions of presentation which are common to published writing in your subject. If in doubt, look closely at good newspapers, journals, and books.

Always create indentation with either the INDENT or TAB key. *Never* use the space bar as you would when typing: on most word-processors, this will not create a regular left-hand edge. Use indenting to regularise your presentation, especially if you wish to draw attention to a piece of writing quoted from another source.

> Double indentation is for those longer quotations which would otherwise occupy more than two or three lines of your own text. Try to be consistent throughout your work. These indented quotes are sometimes displayed in a slightly smaller font size.

Academic users or those writing books may well be tempted to take advantage of automatic footnoting facilities. Word-processors can remove all the headaches from this procedure, which is normally quite difficult. However, do not clutter your text with footnotes just for the sake of showing off your command of the technology. Numbered endnotes are easier to control. Remember that the majority of readers will not wish to be distracted with notes in the text. Reserve this feature only for specialised purposes.

If your printer uses paper which is on a continuous roll, take the trouble to number the pages and detach them from each other before presenting your work to somebody. You should also remove the sprocket-hole strips (called *snarf*) at the sides of the pages before presenting your work.

Fonts - fonts - fonts

The size of font chosen for most purposes should normally be eleven or twelve points. This will be easy to read, and will appear proportionate to its use if it is to be printed on A4 paper. Choose a font with serifs (such as Times New Roman or Garamond) for the body of your writing. Use sans-serif fonts (such as Arial or Helvetica) only for headings or titles: these make continuous reading difficult. Avoid using fancy display fonts (such as Poster or Showtime) unless you have a special purpose for them: these are designed for advertising. Playing with fonts can be good fun, but most forms of writing will look better and more convincing if you exercise restraint and good taste.

If your word-processor automatically hyphenates words at the end of a line, take care to read through your work when you have finished. Eliminate any howlers such as *the-rapist* and *thin-king*. This is another instance in which the word-processor offers a very useful facility — but one whose workings must still be checked by an intelligent being. Note that you can usually switch off automatic hyphenation if you wish to avoid this problem.

Avoid creating paragraphs which start on the last line of a page, or which finish on the first of the next. (These are called, in the jargon of word-processing, 'Widows and Orphans'). The solution to this problem is to

control the number of lines on a page so as to push the text forward. A larger-than-usual gap at the bottom of a page looks more acceptable than a couple of lines stranded there. Sometimes, you may need to delete some of the text on one page so that the last line is not suspended at the top of the next. This is known as *text-surgery*.

If you are producing writing which has titles, subtitles, or main headings (as in a report) these may be presented in either a slightly larger font size than the body of the text, or in a different font altogether. They may also be given emphasis by the use of BOLD, or these two devices may be combined. Avoid the use of continuous capital letters in a title or heading. The results look typographically ugly. Even though many people think it is good practice, there should be no need at all to underline. If something is a title or a heading, then the larger font and the use of bold and double spacing will be enough to give it visual emphasis. Underlining actually makes text harder to read.

Avoid over-writing

BEWARE! One of the few dangers of writing with a word-processor is that of over-writing. It is so easy to edit your work by *adding* explanations or qualifying clauses, that you might unknowingly drift into producing a clotted prose style. The following illustrates how this can happen by inserting material into a simple statement:

- It would be very easy to open the door.
- It would be very easy, *given the circumstances*, to *simply* open the door.
- It *seems* that it would be *remarkably* easy, given *all* the *different* circumstances *surrounding this issue*, to *simply* open the door i*n any way one wished.*

If you are frightened of losing what you see as precious inspiration, you can always save each stage of your work as a separate file. You might not be sure about the material you are removing during the editing process. It could possibly be used elsewhere. Just save it. Eventually, you might have several versions of your work. Some word-processors will allow you to compare versions with each other, using a split screen or multiple windows.

Save your work

You can continue to work on the latest or 'best' version of your work, confident that if you change your mind, earlier versions are still available to you. Beginners using this method will feel reassured. However, you should keep a very clear record of your successive drafts. Give each one a new number (not just the file extension tags .OLD or .NEW) otherwise it will be very easy to get them mixed up.

Writing with a computer leaves us free to write, rewrite, revise, and create as many drafts as we wish — because there is no material to waste. The writing exists only as stored electronic signals. One academic expert on the subject (James Hartley, *Designing Instructional Text*) points to this distinct advantage.

> Composition becomes more enjoyable when it is easy to edit words, sentences, and paragraphs. In addition, there is less fear of failure when the notion disappears that one has to produce a 'neat' handwritten copy the first or second time around.

For those who may feel in need of extra assistance, there are now software packages to help writers structure and organise their work. These are generally known as 'idea-processors' and 'outliners'. They offer ready-made templates, organising facilities, or a framework in which ideas can be assembled. However, they can't do your thinking: you'll still have to generate your own basic text.

HEALTH WARNING! If you are new to word-processors, be prepared in the early stages for alarming experiences which will make you feel like gnawing at your desktop with rage — or throwing your computer through the window. System crashes, getting completely stuck, and losing your work are experiences which cause states of high anxiety. This is quite normal, and you should not imagine that you are the only one who has ever suffered this way. Be patient, and try to learn from any mistakes you make. Gaining experience with computers has what is called *a steep learning curve* [becoming a cliché].

18 Electronic writing

Electronic writing

First there was the advent of the personal computer (the PC). Then came the modem, which allows messages to be sent from one computer to another over telephone lines: this is called electronic mail (Email). Next came networks of users and the exchange of messages on bulletin boards. Then finally there was established a network of networks (the Internet) which encircles the entire globe. There is now a thriving international world of written communication which takes place entirely in electronic form. [Comms experts will have to forgive me for this over-simplified account.]

Nobody is quite sure who all these users are, but they seem to consist of strangely mixed groups of scientists, academics, computer experts, journalists, hobbyists, and communications whizzkids. They also include odd types whose interests range from alternative sex to Kennedy assassination freaks, celebrity fans, and other rock and rollers of the airwaves. Whatever subject you can think of, there's a special interest group out there avidly discussing it.

Writing on the Internet

A lot of this writing is the electronic equivalent of talking on the telephone. Messages are posted onto bulletin boards or circulated amongst user-groups. The announcements might be formal postings, such as the registration details of a conference, or they might be completely frivolous commentary designed merely to amuse. The authorship might be original, or it might be writing which has been taken from another source, then amended or re-worked in some way. Many of the messages include the text of earlier correspondence, like an electronic palimpsest [look it up, and note the spelling]. One important feature of this writing is that it is never printed out onto paper.

The exchanges which take place may be written conventionally, but informal electronic writing seems to have an effect upon the way people express themselves. Quite apart from the technological language which is expanding as rapidly as the development of the Internet itself [3,000 percent new users per year] there also exist sub-groups which have their own conventions, slang, and jargon.

Research has shown that people read messages and writing on computer screens more slowly than they do in print. The medium is not really suitable for reading and reflecting at length — or leisure. The quality of the text appearance and the fact that screens have a limited space make them unsuitable for long documents or works to which you would return for aesthetic pleasure. The electronic medium is, to use Marshal McLuhan's phrase too 'hot' for that. But it is ideal for rapid transfer of information — for messages, bulletins, newsletters, or updated lists.

Messages are normally kept short and to the point — otherwise people will not bother to read them. It is often argued that the main point of any message should not exceed the amount of text which will fit onto one screen, otherwise people will be deterred from reading it. Having said that, some people transmit book-length documents — though they usually split them into separate sections.

The transmission of formal writing and official documents via PCs presents no problem so far as writing skills are concerned. Such texts are likely to be written in advance for later transmission. If you are working in this manner, follow the same guidelines that have been outlined here for writing which appears on a page. If you are sending a business report to a colleague or a customer by Email, you should treat it like a normally printed document. Your writing should be carefully drafted, well edited, and free from mistakes.

What is Netiquette?

However, a great deal of the writing which is launched into cyberspace is much less formal. It may be contributions to discussion groups, exchanges of personal messages, or requests for information. The recipients may be known to you in some cases, but very often you do not know who will be reading these messages. For this reason, there now exists a protocol for corresponding on electronic networks (which has very typically been given the name *Netiquette*). This is a set of guidelines on good manners which arise from the technical and economic nature of the medium itself.

This protocol is especially important when participating in the discussion groups which take place on the Internet. The conventions arise from the unusual nature of the communication which is taking place. The participants have almost certainly never met each other. They live at points all around the globe, in different time zones. They can drop in and drop out of a discussion group at any point in the debate, and they can post messages at any time of the day or night in response to whatever part of the discussion they wish.

It is considered very bad form to post long unsolicited messages directly to anyone's mailbox. Bulletin board postings are expected to have descriptive titles making quite clear what subject is being discussed. In this way the recipient may choose to ignore postings if they don't seem relevant to their interests.

Frequently asked questions

Other points of good behaviour include not sending messages twice or to the wrong address (typical beginner's mistakes); not being sarcastic or abusive (which can seem tempting); and not asking very elementary questions which have been asked by other beginners many times before. To overcome this problem, many systems have an archive of answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs). Newcomers especially are urged to read these before asking naive questions. Anyone who ignores this procedure may be considered fair game for satire or even the exasperated advice about reading the manual — RTFM! [which I'll leave you to work out]. It's an egalitarian world — but a tough one.

As you may have noted, electronic communication tends to create enormous amounts of jargon. And worse than that, it is not easy to pick up a dictionary or glossary to look up a term you don't understand. The vocabulary, like the technical hardware of computers and information technology, is being generated at such an explosive rate that few people can keep up with the creation of new terms.

The newsgroup participants may go on at length discussing their favourite topics and hobbyhorses — and yet they seem to be keen on the use of abbreviations. They use expressions such as *btw* (by the way) IMHO (in my humble opinion) *sysop* (systems operator) MOTOS (member of the opposite sex) and acronyms such as <*rofl*> 'rolling on the floor, laughing'.

Until the technology becomes more sophisticated, everybody is currently stuck with writing in ASCII code (American Standard Code for Information Interchange — pronounced 'ask-ee'). This is a set of symbols devised to enable messages to be exchanged between different computers. It is a severe limitation, because the code only includes the capital and lowercase letters of the alphabet, plus a few extra signs. It is not possible to indicate italics, underlining, bold, or any of the other devices which might normally give emphasis to a text.

Visual emphasis

It is therefore difficult to indicate any 'tone of voice' which might normally be indicated by the use of italics and other typographical marks. Irony and humour are notoriously tricky to transmit. However, some authors are very nimble in getting round this limitation by inventive use of the keyboard. They put stars and underscore marks around words to imitate italics *like this* or the titles of books (_The Age of Innocence_) for instance. Capital letters are not used as much as you might imagine, because this is regarded as SHOUTING! Some writers also provide a written commentary on their attitude by adding parenthetical remarks in brackets, such as <sigh!> or <grin!>.

Electronic writers are also much given to using continuous hyphens or the equals sign to draw lines (---) and double lines (====) to keep different parts of their work separate. They're also adept with carets (^^^) angled brackets <these>, vertical lines | these | and the hash mark (#) to create special effects [including amusing or rude pictures]. These devices can be quite useful, but don't forget to remove them and substitute conventional paragraphs if you are going to print out any of your work on paper.

The most famous device for indicating humorous intent is the smiley (:-) [a diagrammatic face turned on its side]. This is inserted after a statement to indicate that the author is not really serious. There are a number of others used to represent different moods, such as the downturned mouth indicating sadness (:-(and many complicated variations. Some sceptics [of whom I am one] shun these in the search for expression by linguistic means alone.

Emoticons

The technical name for these devices is 'Emoticons'. This is a contraction of the terms 'emotional-icons' — which illustrates another piece of jargon and a neologism [why not look up that one]. But beware! Although they seem to create universal friendliness, they *can* be used ironically. An author might write something which is intentionally obnoxious — and then follow with a smiley. The world of electronic communication can be dangerous at times.

In the very immediate and fast medium of electronic messages, typing and spelling mistakes are easily made, and generally tolerated. In fact, any complaints about them or corrections offered can be considered rather bad form. Such is the chummy tone of most interchanges, any sort of high handedness or stuffiness is out of place. Correct someone's spelling, and they might stop writing to you. Post corrections in public, and you might also be deluged with angry mail [mail bombing].

Differences of opinion however do sometimes break out — often in the discussion of such contentious issues as religion and politics (but even on subjects such as typography). Because the medium is hot but the correspondents are at a distance in time and space from each other, there is a temptation to be verbally reckless. This is known as *flaming* in the jargon of the Internet, and by logical extension heated arguments are sometimes called *flame wars*.

19 Common problems

Common problems

Many people find writing a chore, and for some it can be a source of acute anguish. In most cases this is probably because of a lack of practice. After all, if you work in a garage, a supermarket, or a hospital every day, then being asked to write a report might represent a task for which you have not been trained. [Most professional writers would probably feel just as anxious if they had to fix their own car.]

The problem might be compounded by a number of popular myths about writing and writers. If we can dispel some of these misconceptions, then the process may not seem so threatening after all. Like many skills which tend to be surrounded by mystique, writing might a seem a lot more straightforward if it is viewed in a realistic light.

For instance, many people believe that some writers are 'blessed with a gift' of being able to write well — and that if you don't have this gift you might as well not bother trying. What they do not realise is that many, many successful writers — even those who are quite famous — sweat blood over the writing process. They work hard, planning, revising, and writing draft after draft until they are satisfied with the end result. Most of them would argue that it's not a 'gift', but a hard-won craft.

The blank sheet of paper

When given a writing task, some people sit down very reluctantly in front of a blank sheet of paper. They struggle to eke out a few words, feel overwhelmed by the difficulty, and then stop, dissatisfied with what they have produced. They come to the conclusion that they 'can't write'. [This sort of response sits very easily alongside the notion that other people have a special gift.] But it isn't surprising that they have 'failed'. They have missed out several stages in the writing process: generating ideas, making plans, creating drafts, and revising the work. The simple lesson to learn here is that it is very difficult to produce a piece of successful writing at just one attempt.

If you do *not* plan your writing in some way, you are probably giving yourself extra work. Just think of all the things you are trying to do at once. You are grappling with the subject you have to write about; you are trying to find some way to translate your thoughts into words; you also have to

put these words into some order; and on top of all that you are probably aware that the separate topics of your subject have to be arranged in some sort of logical sequence. No wonder it's hard to write! If you fall into this category, keep in mind the importance of planning, or 'pre-writing' as it is sometimes rather tweely called. (See **Writing Strategies - Chapter 14**).

Planning can eliminate two of those problems, leaving you free to concentrate on the detail. By thinking about your subject before you start writing, you can decide what these separate topics are, and you can arrange them in some logical sequence. Once you start writing, you don't have to worry about what will come next, because that has already been decided. You are left to decide only the detail of expressing your ideas.

Many people don't realise that writing should be revised, edited, and checked in detail before it is presented publicly. If you are merely sending a note to a friend, this may not be necessary; but writing which is serious or intended for the public domain should be scrutinised closely before it leaves your hands. If you haven't already done so, read the chapters on **Generating ideas (Chapter 2)** and **Drafting (Chapter 11)**, as well as the section on planning in **Writing essays (Chapter 16)**.

Another common problem which afflicts those who may feel underconfident or overwhelmed by a writing task is the idea that writing must be 'impressive' in order to be effective. This can lead to inflation, 'purple prose' and strangulated attempts to make a good impression. Writing which is straining hard to make an effect usually *repels* readers rather than impressing them. You will make a much better impression by writing in a manner which is simple and clear.

What we'll look at in the short sections which follow are some of the most common problems which afflict those people who lack experience in writing. None of them represent outright mistakes or criminal offenses of a literary kind. They are matters of weaknesses which can be eliminated, good taste which can be developed, and traps which can be avoided.

The over-personal tone

For most forms of writing, too much 'I think' and 'I feel' is excessively personal and subjective. It is likely to be boring for another person to read, and it encourages a slipping into the chatty conversational manner which is often an excuse for sloppy thinking.

> I think that Katherine Mansfield is a great prose writer, and when I read 'The Voyage' I felt that it was the best story I had read for a long time, and I ...

The easiest way to avoid this is to use *impersonal* statements instead. 'It could be argued that ...', 'it seems as if ...', or 'it would appear that ...'. But an even better approach is to use direct assertions. That is, make such claims or statements without writing yourself onto the page as well. You don't need to intrude, because if you are expressing your personal opinions, the reader probably knows that already.

> Katherine Mansfield is a very accomplished prose writer, and her short story 'The Voyage' is arguably one of her finest achievements.

If you are writing business letters you can most easily avoid the inappropriate first-person mode by using the collective 'we'. After all, if you are speaking on behalf of a company this will be perfectly reasonable. You might then reserve use of the first person pronoun solely for expressing your own views.

Over-generalising

This usually arises from attempts to avoid the first person mode, or from misguided efforts to appear rather grandiose. 'Reading Mansfield's well-sculpted prose, the reader feels that ...' as a substitute for 'I feel ...' is both clumsy and unacceptable. It suggests that all readers will respond in the same way and that there is only one possible response to the subject in question. Try to avoid this expression and all its variations, such as 'the reader becomes involved with ...' and 'the reader's attention is gained ...'.

The other common form of over-generalising arises when a particular example is discussed as if it were the general case. It is tempting and very easy to use an expression such as 'Thus Marx's work shows us that ...' This suggests that you have read everything Marx ever wrote — which is probably not the case. Variations of the approach occur in phrases such as 'Women in the nineteenth century were all ...' and 'The French have always been a nation which finds it impossible to ...'. Whatever the conclusions to these two statements, they are making claims about every woman in the nineteenth century and the entire population of France. Neither statement is likely to be true, because there will be so many exceptions.

The solution to this problem (in both cases) is to be more accurate and precise. This is a matter of clear thinking rather than written style — but it is at this point that the two subjects intersect. If you wish to make such a claim but do not have exact numbers or percentages — then you should be more cautious and modest. You could at least say 'Many women in the nineteenth century were ...' and 'French people on the whole seem to ...'.

Moralising

This very often goes along with over-generalising and takes two common forms. The first occurs when the writer makes sanctimonious judgements with a lofty tone of assumed superiority: 'It is because we despise such immoral actions in others that ...'. You should not assume too readily that 'we' will all agree with you, or even that readers will share your opinion. Try to avoid turning a writing task into a vehicle for sermonising or tub-thumping. Pious sentiments concerning 'sexual promiscuity' and 'declining standards' should be avoided — especially when they are delivered (as they often are) from a self-selected position of moral righteousness.

The second form of moralising arises from failing to acknowledge that 'morals' are relative. What is acceptable in one society may not be in another. Try to avoid sweeping statements on morality by keeping in mind that your own system of beliefs may seem strange or irrational to someone else. This will also help you to be specific and to present your case or discussion concretely, rather than hiding behind empty generalisations and emotional rhetoric. Also, please note that the term 'moral' is either an

adjective as in a *moral victory* or a noun as in *the moral of the story*. Statements such as *It is a moral thing to do* and *she is a very moral sort of person* do not actually make much sense.

Signposting

Although it may take you a long time to generate a piece of writing, it will be read much more quickly — perhaps in as little as a few minutes. Consequently, expressions such as 'Later, I hope to demonstrate that ...' and 'I will be dealing in a subsequent section with ...' are not needed as often as many people imagine. This phenomenon is called 'signposting' your argument or intention. Remarks of this kind should only be necessary in a very long piece of writing, such as an academic thesis or a long report.

Having said that, I have noticed that summaries, chapter digests, bulleted lists, and 'quick guide' or 'fast track' introductions are increasingly popular — particularly in books of instruction. Anything which enhances clarity is welcome — but as a reader I often find these 'What this chapter will cover' preludes slightly irritating. A clear chapter title (and possibly an explanatory subtitle) should be enough. [Yours sincerely, Disgusted of Manchester.]

The problem with signposting is that it often draws attention to use of the first person, and also suggests that the piece of work is so huge that a guided tour is necessary. A good piece of writing should be planned and structured in such a way that it speaks for itself. That is, the arrangement of its parts will make its meaning apparent as the reader progresses. Only use direction indicators where they are necessary — such as referring readers to other parts of a work, as in see *Chapter IV.*

One

Many people turn to using *one* in an understandable effort to avoid an over-personal tone. But the problem with using one is that once one has begun to use it, one is obliged to continue with it, isn't one? And one begins to sound more than a little pretentious, doesn't one? To compound this problem, people who use the term often forget that they have started a statement in this mode, and are drawn back towards the more natural you — as the following [garbled] example illustrates perfectly.

> Once one turns professional, however, one's time suddenly equates with one's income: the more rationally it is spent towards a given end, given correct judgement on the books you publish.

Repetition

Sometimes it is difficult to avoid repeating key terms or expressions, and the result can be very irritating. This is particularly true if the subject is very specific. Be prepared to use a thesaurus, but take care to choose a near-synonym from the same subject area [semantic field] and not a different one altogether. For example, if you are writing about educational policy and wish to avoid repeating the term 'education', it would be no use choosing the terms 'nurture' or 'care' just because they were listed. These belong to the sphere of child-rearing. You might however chose 'academic' or 'pedagogic'. Keep in mind that you can't simply pluck words from a dictionary or a thesaurus and use them as if they all had the same value.

Writers who lack experience often begin successive sentences with the same words instead of finding some form of substitute or variation. It is worth trying to avoid unnecessary repetition, and rigorous editing is one answer to this problem. The following [weak] example is taken from what is otherwise a very competent essay in literary studies.

> To J C Ballard, the history that emerges from *Empire of the Sun* is not there merely to provide background or local colour. *Empire of the Sun* assumes that the reader has some knowledge of its historical content. The novel assumes that the reader has some knowledge of Asiatic history ...

This could have been improved by avoiding the second mention of the novel's title and deleting the phrase which follows it, since it is repeated in the next sentence:

> To J C Ballard, the history that emerges from *Empire of the Sun* is not there merely to provide background or local colour. The novel assumes that the reader has some knowledge of its context in Asiatic history ...

Next, a brief extract from a rather good GCE 'A' level politics essay concerned with prime ministerial power during Margaret Thatcher's government. The writer is well informed (especially for a seventeen year old) but a lack of experience shows through in the repetition of the phrases which are highlighted.

> Therefore as far as these *classic characteristics* of *Prime Ministerial power* are concerned, *Mrs Thatcher* has only continued to pursue the same lines of action as other *Prime Ministers* before her. From this evidence it can only be concluded that as far as these *classic characteristics* are concerned, the *Premiership of Mrs Thatcher* has not told us anything new about the need for *reform of the powers of the Prime Minister.* It is certainly true that *Mrs. Thatcher* has used these *powers* more effectively than most. However this does not mean that we are provided with any further justifications for reform *of the powers of the Prime Minister.* However this is not to say that *Mrs. Thatcher's Premiership* has not demonstrated the need for reform.

It should be obvious that such repetition creates a jarring effect. One solution is to look for words or phrases which can be substituted for those being repeated. This is not always an easy thing to do, but it is certainly worth making the effort. What you might keep in mind is that once you have *named* the person you are speaking about (Mrs Thatcher in this example) there is no reason to repeat the name afterwards. So long as nobody else is named after the first instance, you can use *she* [or *he*]: the reader will quite rightly assume that you are still talking about the same person. This extract might therefore be more succinctly expressed thus:

> Therefore, as far as these classic characteristics of Prime Ministerial power are concerned, Mrs Thatcher has only continued to pursue the same lines of action as her predecessors. From this evidence, her Premiership has not told us anything new about the need for reform. It is certainly true that she has used her powers more effectively than most; but this does not mean that we are provided with any further justifications for a revision of these powers. However, this is not to say that her Premiership has not demonstrated the need for reform.

However, in trying to avoid the repetition of key names or phrases, some people fall into the trap of what Fowler rather ironically calls *elegant variation*. That is, rather than write plainly and clearly, the writer strives to make an impressive gesture. The effect can be bathetic, as in the following example:

> Shakespeare was not the only dramatist of the Elizabethan era. Marlowe and Johnson both established reputations which have lasted until the present day. However, the *Swan of Avon* has commonly been perceived as the greatest playwright of all.

Over-writing

This can occur in a variety of forms. It might be a simple statement which is clogged with too many qualifying clauses, or a piece of fictional prose which is over-decorated with adjectives. It could be a polemic in which the author is desperately trying to impress an audience by dressing everything up in grandiose terms — which is sometimes called *inflation*. It could simply be writing in which the author is using many words to say almost nothing.

There is no virtue in writing *He called into requisition the services of the family medical practitioner* when you could say much more simply *He sent for the doctor*. One of George Orwell's famous rules is 'Never use a long word where a short one will do'. By 'long word' he meant words such as 'requisition' and 'practitioner' which have obviously been selected to impress the reader.

Check in particular for too many adjectives qualifying a noun or adverbs a verb — both of which are common features of over-writing and a lack of experience. Choose the one adjective or adverb which makes the necessary point, then delete the rest. However, like so many other things concerned with the use of language, this is not an absolute rule. Some writers can get away with it. But they are usually employing such a device very consciously, whereas the inexperienced writer is doing so probably without thinking. The American writer Tom Woolfe exploits the piling up of adjectives and description as a studied mannerism:

> Chaser would wear a big heavy overcoat, one of those big long heavy double-breasted triple-button quadruple-lapel numbers like you see the old men wearing in Forster's Cafeteria. (*Mau-Mauing the Flack Catchers, 1971*).

Over-writing can also occur at a micro-level when people use two words which mean the same thing. [The technical name for this is tautology.] Some commonly used examples are: *enclosed herewith, final completion, joint co-operation, mingle together, past history, unite together.* These are terms which we might use casually in speech; but they should not be allowed to pass into written expression.

One of the few dangers of writing with a word-processor is that of producing work which is over-written. It is so easy to edit your work by *adding* explanations or qualifying clauses, that you might be tempted into producing a clotted prose style. It is also very tempting to believe that you are improving the quality by adding more, when the opposite might be the case. Students desperate to produce the 1500 or 2000 words required in an academic essay might easily lead themselves into the habit of 'padding' their work just to make up the word count. The result is likely to be an essay which is very turgid. (See **Using Computers - Chapter 17**)

A grammar-checker can be a useful corrective to this temptation. Most of them are capable of highlighting longer than average sentences and clusters of clauses which are poorly related to each other. They might also spotlight redundant terms and tautologies within a sentence. However, they could not draw your attention to two consecutive sentences which meant the same thing — so you still need to be vigilant whilst editing. For most people except the most experienced writers, it is probably advisable to split up over-long sentences into two or even three shorter statements. Your prose style is much more likely to be improved by conciseness and brevity than to be harmed by over-simplification.
(See **Sentences - Chapter 7**).

In his famous book of advice to Civil servants, *Plain Words*, Sir Ernest Gowers quotes the following sample of an official directive and highlights those parts of it which could be removed without significantly altering its meaning.

> Authorities should be *definitely* discouraged from committing themselves to purchase in advance of approval. If they do *so commit themselves* they should be asked in every case to explain why *they have do so.* Where it is decided to accept the explanation it should *none the less* be made clear *to the Authorities* that we shall not *be prepared to* recommend a loan for more than the figure acceptable to us.

20 Bad writing

Bad writing

This is a short rogues' gallery of bad practice. It is short because we don't want to dwell on negative examples, but it exists to offer a few warnings and to explain how problems are often caused. Most of the items have been mentioned elsewhere in advice on what to avoid, or cautions of one kind or another. I think they are worth second mention in a different context.

What are the most common causes of bad writing? Well, some people are just not used to expressing themselves on paper at all, and can't be expected to write fluently. Apart from that however, the following bad habits and misunderstandings cause the most problems. They are not in any particular order. Some people may be stuck with just one of these weaknesses. In the worst cases they may be suffering with more than one.

- Using speech patterns in writing
- Poor control of punctuation
- Weak grammar and syntax
- Sentences too long
- Unrelated clauses
- Jumbled vocabulary
- Straining to impress
- Mired in cliché

Using speech patterns

When we speak to each other, we don't use grammatically complete sentences, careful constructions, and beautifully modulated syntax. Our utterances are often quite ungrammatical, abbreviated, and incomplete. We might **say** *She wasn't there at home, it'll be later when I'm going to call*: this would be acceptable in speech. But we would **write** *She was not at home, so I will call again later*. If these habits of speech are carried over into the written language the results are usually not very good. Remember that on the page we do not have any of the other parts of spoken communication to guide us: tone of voice, accent, stress, and facial expression are absent. The two forms of communication may both use words as their basic element, but they are two different 'codes'.

If you wish to be understood, and if you wish to make a good impression in the written language, then you should stay fairly close to what is called 'standard English'. For most forms of writing, if you want to move away from this norm, you should know what it is you are doing, and you should have a good reason for doing so. It might be acceptable to use dialects and the irregularities of the spoken language if you were writing fiction, trying to illustrate someone's character. In almost all types of formal writing however, your best plan is to stay close to the norm — if only because you will thereby communicate with the largest number of people. This is not to be proscriptive or fuddy-duddy. If you have the confidence and the skill, you can use whatever linguistic devices you wish — but then you would probably not be reading this book.

Poor control of punctuation

Some people scatter marks of punctuation like confetti throughout their writing, making little distinction between the range of devices available. Yet if it is not used accurately and consistently, this creates an unsettling effect. The sense of a statement can be rendered ambiguous or obscure. Reading can become like hacking your way through a linguistic jungle. Remember that commas, semicolons, and colons are used to create pauses of different length in the grammar and the sense of a statement (see **Punctuation**).

Another common form of poor punctuation occurs when one punctuation mark is substituted for another. The most frequent abuse of this kind is the use of the comma to string together statements which are in fact grammatically separate. They might be independent sentences, or (more usually) notes or brief 'thoughts'. T*he senator's reaction was only outrage that a man's career should be threatened, it was her word against his, they chose to believe his.* These are separate statements, and should be treated as such. The first comma here should be a full stop (followed by a capital letter) and the second a colon.

The other extreme of the same problem is too *little* punctuation. This usually has the effect of leaving readers disoriented. We are not sure where one clause ends and the next begins. Unless there is great pressure to continue, we rapidly tire of trying to make sense of writing which has no

stress or grammatical indicators. Let's look at an example used elsewhere. It isn't a particularly long sentence, but the absence of any punctuation makes it very difficult to understand at first reading.

> Each night you stay at a Roberts-Plaza Moat Houses UK hotel at the fully published or corporate rate you are entitled to a special discount voucher.

Jumbled vocabulary

This usually occurs either because the writer doesn't have a firm grasp of the meaning and best use of words — or because there is a 'straining for effect' which goes wrong. Sometimes the two features may be combined. A local council circular [in what we might call 'Town Hall prose'] offers the following example of the first weakness:

> Manchester has a strong objective to be widely recognised as a fully accessible city, and energetically supports the overall approach of the Action Programme.

The council might have a strong *ambition*; it might have these goals as its *objective*; but it cannot have a *strong objective*, because the term 'objective' is an abstract noun which cannot be qualified by 'strong'.

The over-long sentence

Long sentences should generally be avoided — unless you have very good control of grammar and syntax. This is a very common problem for beginners. Some people start out on their subject, add qualifying clauses, explanations, or digressions of some kind, then seem to forget where they have come from. Their sentences drift grammatically and usually become difficult to understand.

> If we contrast the past situation where although a doctor may not have been able to cure a patient, he would have visited the patient regularly giving emotional support; with a situation that might occur today, such as the impersonal treatment of a patient using highly sophisticated technology, it could be argued that this transition has produced a less humane or compassionate system.

The following is a more subtle example of the same phenomenon. The sentence isn't quite so disastrous, but it should be much easier to understand. The weaknesses are caused by its length, but also by its poor grammar and confusing repetitions. [We are back in the Town Hall.]

> The Programme is of vital importance, and would assist in creating a significant improvement in the quality of life of disabled people of all ages, not least as access to transport is a key requirement in education and employment, as well as for social, leisure, health, shopping and other activities.

It starts with the active verb *is* then switches to the conditional *would*; the three *ofs* in quick succession are clumsy; and *not least as* [which should be *because*] is not properly paralleled in *as well as*. Like most of the examples we have looked at, it would be improved if it were split into two separate sentences.

Pretentiousness

Some people use writing as a vehicle to 'impress' others. Rather than make direct statements they use elaborate constructions and wordy phrases in an attempt to appear very literary or clever. These attempts rarely succeed because writing does reveal its author's 'style'. An insincere purpose will show through — as the following example should illustrate.

> One would hesitate, however, to sip from the same poisoned chalice as those who would speciously crusade the assertion that literature is quintessentially socially functional. Pose the following interrogative: Would Dante, Shakespeare, or Milton, from their peerless pinnacles, have sullied their art, prostituted the muse which their endeavours had enthroned, by indicating something as trivial, as unworthy, as a social purpose? The art of such as these argues another view; that at the heart of all great creative achievement lies a self-justifying, eternally fathomless and sacred mystery.

Cliché

Let's finish with a stunning example from the world of provincial journalism. In his book on *Newspaper Style*, Keith Waterhouse points out that many tabloid journalists inhabit a linguistic world so steeped in cliché that their writing has the appearance of being constructed from ready-made parts. The following is an extract from a genuine theatre review (with the clichés italicised) *but the names have been changed to protect the innocent*. [That's a deliberate example!]

> *By their very nature* cabarets tend to be *a bit of a hit and miss affair.* And Manchester's own Downtown Cabaret is *ample proof* of that. *When it was good it was good and when it was bad it was awful.* Holding *this curate's egg* together was John Keswick acting as compere and keeping the hotch-potch of sketches and songs *running along smoothly*. And his professionalism *shone through* as he kept his *hand on the tiller* and *steered the show through* a difficult audience with *his own brand of* witticism. Local playwright Alan Chivers had previously *worked like a Trojan* and managed to *marshall the talents of a bevy of* Manchester's *rising stars.*

What then are the cures for bad writing? There are essentially two solutions. One is simply to take more care, and subject what you write to detailed scrutiny. If you are in any doubt at all about something you have written, be prepared to change it. If the meaning is ambiguous or cloudy to *you*, it will almost certainly be so to somebody else. You might ask a tolerant friend to read over what you have written. Check that it makes sense. The other solution is to make yourself more aware of the language and rhythms of good writing. Read the work of those who are known to write well. Absorb the syntax, the cadences, and the texture of good prose.

21 Writer's block

Writer's block

When faced with the task of producing a piece of writing, many people develop a mental block. It can be like a state of panic, emptiness, paralysis — or just a sheer inability to get started. You simply cannot make the pen move across the page. After agonizing for a while you might just put down a few words, but then immediately cross them out again — and you are back where you started.

Suddenly, all sorts of other tasks seem very attractive: going shopping, or just taking the dog for a walk. You desperately *want* to write your report or your essay, and you might even have a deadline to meet. However, the last thing you can bring yourself to do is start writing — and the longer you worry about it, the more intractable the problem seems to become.

If you sometimes feel like this, here is the first piece of good news: *it is a very common problem.* Even experienced writers sometimes suffer from it. You should not think that you are the only person in the world who has ever encountered such a difficulty. What you need to know is how to get out of the blocked condition. Understanding some of the causes may help.

Most people read as part of their everyday lives, even if it is only glancing through newspapers and the occasional magazine. In doing so they keep their reading skills sharpened. Some may even develop them further by an active habit of reading. However, there are a lot of people who have hardly any need to write as part of their normal life. Their writing skills are therefore allowed to go rusty or even wither away. Such people simply become out of practice.

There are also a series of other possible reasons — many of them psychological in origin. Some people may become blocked because they fear the judgement of others on what they will produce. Sometimes the block is a symptom of acute procrastination. Others reasons may be connected with simple factors such as lack of preparation, or the misguided but quite common belief that you should be able to write successfully at the first attempt.

The notes which follow are a series of the most common statements people make when suffering from writer's block. They should help you identify your own case if you have this problem. There are explanations of one or two of the most probable causes for the condition — followed by tips on how to effect a cure. Read through all the examples given. It will help you to understand that overcoming writer's block often requires engagement with those parts of the writing process which come before you put pen to paper.

The suggestions are based on the supposition that most people suffering from this form of block will not be very experienced, and that they will be helped by drawing up plans or notes for the writing task which lies before them.

'I'm just terrified at the very thought of writing'

Cause Perhaps you are just not used to writing or you are out of recent practice. Maybe you are over-anxious and possibly setting yourself standards which are far too high. You possibly imagine that your writing should be free from blemishes or mistakes the moment it appears on the page.

Cure Limber up and get yourself used to the activity of writing by scribbling something on a scrap of paper which nobody else will see. Write a letter to yourself, a description of the room you are in — anything just to practise getting words onto paper. Remember that your attempts can be thrown away: they are a means to an end, not a product to be retained. Once you have made one or two dummy runs in this manner, you will feel more confident in making a first approach to the writing task in hand.

'I'm not sure what to say'

Cause Maybe you have not done enough preparation for your writing task, and you don't have any notes to work from. You may have no sketches or details to use as a basis for what you want to say. Perhaps you havn't yet accumulated enough ideas, comments, or materials on the topic you are supposed to be dealing with.

Cure Sort out your ideas before you start writing. Make rough notes on the subject(s) you wish to discuss. These can then be expanded when you are ready to begin. Draw up a list of items to be considered. 'Brainstorm' your subject; read about it; put all your preliminary ideas on rough paper, then sift out the best ones for a working plan. Alternatively, make a start with anything, then be prepared to change it later.

'My mind goes blank'

Cause Maybe you have not done enough preparation on the topic in question and you are therefore short of ideas or arguments. Perhaps you do not have rough notes or a working plan to help you formulate a response. Maybe you are afraid afraid of making a false start or saying the wrong thing. Perhaps you mistakenly imagine that your first attempts should be perfect.

Cure Make notes for what you intend to do, and sketch out some ideas in outline first. Try starting yourself off on scrap paper — which nobody else will see. You can practise your opening statement and then throw it away once you are started. Write down anything that comes into your head: you can always cross it out or change it later. It doesn't really matter what you write, because your first attempt will be superseded by a second or third.

'It's just a problem of the first sentence'

Cause These can be quite hard to write! There is quite a skill in immediately striking the right note. You may be thinking 'How can I make an introduction to something which isn't yet written?' Maybe you don't havea plan and therefore don't know what will follow any opening statement you make. Perhaps you are setting yourself standards which are much too high or unrealistic. Maybe you are fixated on the order of your statements — or just possibly using this as an excuse to put off the moment when you will have to start writing.

Cure Leave a blank space at the beginning of what you are going to write. The first sentence can be written when you have finished the rest. Make a start somewhere else and come back to it later. Alternatively, write any sentence you wish, knowing that you will change it later. Don't imagine that the parts of your writing have to be produced in exactly the same order that they will finally be arranged. You may need to flesh out the substance of a piece of work before you know how it will best be introduced.

'I'm not quite ready to start yet'

Cause This could be procrastination. In its most common form, this is usually just finding an excuse for not making a start. But it is also possible that you have not finished digesting and sorting out your ideas on the topic(s) of your writing task.

Cure If it is procrastination, then write something else of no importance, just to get yourself into the mood. Writing is sometimes like physical exercise: starting from cold can feel difficult, but once you are warmed up it seems a lot easier. If it is not just stalling, then maybe you need to revise your notes, drum up a few more ideas, or make a working plan to give you a point from which to make a start. Remember that you don't necessarily need to start from the beginning.

'I've got too much information'

Cause If you have several pages of notes (or even more) this can sometimes seem daunting. You may have assembled a lot of secondary materials or collected lots of background details for your writing task. Maybe you have not yet selected the details which are most important, and eliminated anything secondary or non-essential.

Cure Digest and edit your materials so as to pare them down to what is most essential. Several pages of notes may need to be reduced to just one or two. Don't try to include everything. Don't let yourself be overwhelmed by too much detail. Draw up outline notes which include only topics directly relevant to your task. If your plan is too long, then condense it. Eliminate anything which is not absolutely necessary for the piece of work in hand.

'I'm just waiting for one small piece of information'

Cause It may be that an important piece of background reading, a name or date is holding you up. You may be waiting for a book to be returned to your library. You might be short of a crucial detail for a piece of research or a report. But it could also be another form of procrastination — finding an excuse to avoid facing the task in hand.

Cure Make a start without the information. You can leave gaps in your work and add things later. Alternatively, make a calculated guess — which you can change if necessary when you have acquired the missing detail. Remember that your first draft will be revised later anyway: additional pieces of information can be added during the re-drafting process.

'I'm frightened of producing rubbish'

Cause Maybe you are being too hard on yourself and setting standards which are unreasonably high. Alternatively, the piece of work may really be important and you mustn't make any mistakes. However, this reason for not writing can sometimes be an odd form of pride. Some people use it to hide from revealing their writing skills in public.

Cure Remember that every word of your first draft can be changed, and you can eliminate anything which is of poor quality. Be prepared to do some work on what you produce, and accept a modest achievement at first. Unless the piece of writing is very important, it is unlikely that anybody else will be over-critical. In addition — many people underrate their potential ability.

'I'm stuck at the planning stage'

Cause This may be a hidden fear of starting work, or it may be a form of misplaced perfectionism. It could be that you are making too much of planning, or that you are short of ideas. You may have started gathering information, and allowed this preliminary stage to become an end in itself.

Cure Make a start on the first draft anyway. You can create a first attempt which will probably help you to clarify your ideas as you are writing it. This first draft may then be used to help you devise more refined plans. These can be used as the basis for your second and any further drafts. Don't make a fetish out of planning (even though it is very useful).

'I'm not sure in what order to put things'

Cause Maybe there are a number of possibilities, and you are seeking the best order for your ideas. But for many writing tasks there may not necessarily be any 'best' or 'right' order. You are probably looking for some coherence or logical order to create structure for the writing task in hand.

Cure Draw up a number of different lists or plans. Lay them out together, compare them, then select the best. Be prepared to chop and change the order of your information until the most persuasive arrangement emerges. Do this before you start writing, then you are not trying to solve too many problems at the same time once you begin. However, keep in mind that rearrangements of the materials should also be possible later as well if it helps create a more convincing result.

'It's bound to contain a mistake somewhere'

Cause You may be so anxious to produce good work that your fear of making a mistake is producing the 'block'. Alternatively, this may be a form of striving for the impossible, or setting yourself unreachably high goals so as to create an excuse for not starting.

Cure Your first efforts should only be a draft, so you can check for mistakes at a later stage. Be prepared to make a start, then deal with any possible errors when you come to reread the work prior to writing a second draft. Very few people can write without making mistakes — even professional authors — so there is no need to burden yourself with this block. You can check for mistakes of a factual nature, and problems with grammar or punctuation can be ironed out by rigorous editing.

Colophon

This digital guide is set in Adobe Caslon Pro at 11 point font size. The typeface is a variant designed by Carol Twombly and based on William Caslon's own specimen pages for the font created between 1734 and 1770.

Carol Twombly (b 1959) is an American calligrapher and typeface designer who has created many typefaces, including Trajan, Myriad, and Adobe Caslon. She worked as a type designer at Adobe Systems from 1988 through to 1999.

William Caslon (1692-1766) based his type on Dutch models, and since the Caslon Foundry was in business for a long time, there are many variations on the Caslon typeface.

When Carol Twombly set out to create a new font for Adobe in 1991 based on Caslon's eighteenth century designs, she faced a challenge. In Caslon's day, hand made and hand set type was the norm. Each character of a font set was cut from the same metal punch at a single size. Naturally, variations crept into the font designs at different sizes. The larger fonts have greater contrasts of stroke weight and have more refined details than the smaller sizes.

Twombly incorporated designs from the various sizes of Caslon to create an archetypal version called Adobe Caslon, which is now accepted as one of the best of the digital Caslons.

In 1994 Twombly received the Charles Peignot award from the Association Typographique Internationale for outstanding contribution to type design. She was the first woman to receive this prestigious honour.

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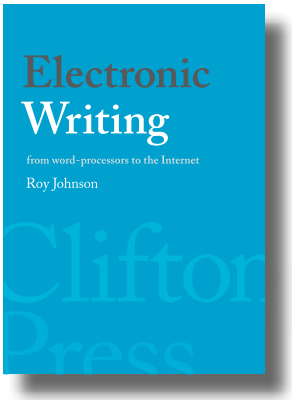

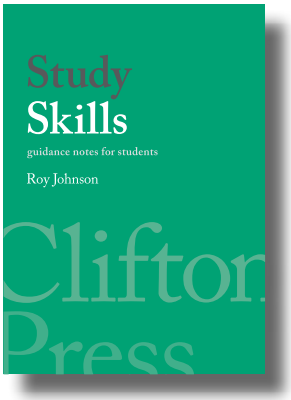

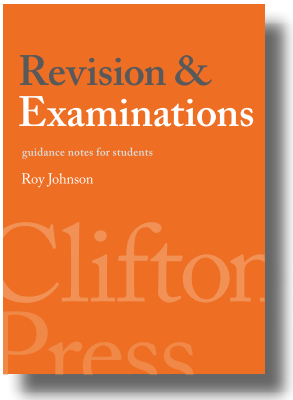

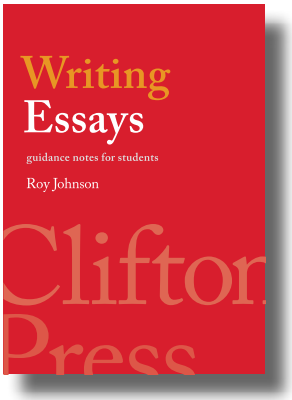

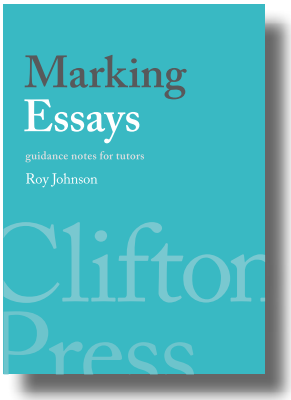

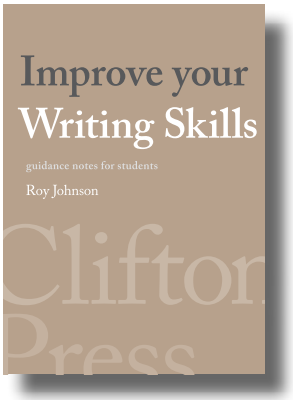

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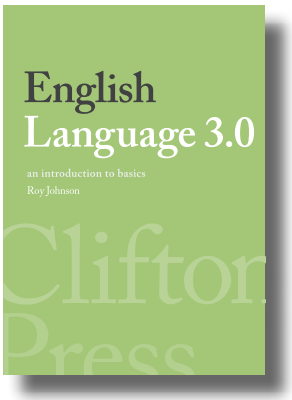

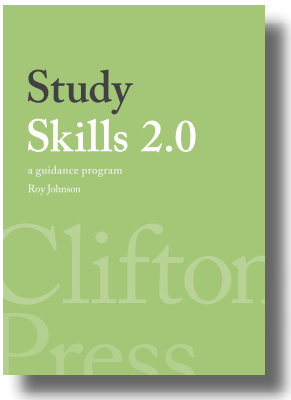

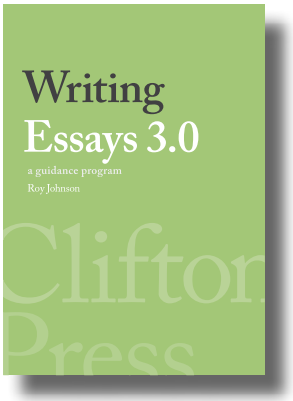

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Clifton Press
ISBN 0951984454