

Ideas and Content

We don't want [the writer] to describe every ride at Disneyland, or tell us that the Grand Canyon is awesome...If one of the rides at Disneyland got stuck, or if somebody fell into the awesome Grand Canyon, that would be worth hearing about.

- William Zinsser

Ideas and Content is what you have to say – the reason for writing your paper. Everything about your writing begins with that message. If you can choose your **own** topic, pick something important to you, that you know a lot about. If someone picks the topic for you, look for a way to connect it to your own experience. That way, you can use what you know.

This is one of the secrets ~ **keep it small**. If your topic is too big (like “Animals of Africa”) you’ll wind up trying to tell too much and not be able to focus on any one idea long enough to make it clear. Skinny it down (“Why Lions Hunt in Pairs”) so you can handle it. Put in the kind of details to show you pay attention to the world and notice how it works.

Surprise your reader with what you know. Don’t spend time on things that anyone else could write. Don’t say “Cooking in a restaurant can be hard work.” Even people who don’t cook can figure that out. Instead, tell what goes on in the kitchen if an angry customer sent the food back. *That* would be an interesting insight!

One more hint: **Make your ideas crystal clear**. Avoid general statements like “Our trip was exciting.” Exciting how? Instead say, “I chased two very hungry black bears away from our camping supplies.” Specific details that help the reader picture what is happening can *make or break* your writing.

Human beings have a great need to represent their experience through writing. We need to make our truths beautiful.

- Lucy McCormick Calkins

Ideas and Content

5. Paper-Focused, Clear, and Specific

My writing is full of all kinds of details that keep the reader's attention and show what is really important about my topic.

- I know a lot about this topic, and when someone else reads it, they'll find out some new or little-known information.
- I made sure to show what was happening ('The wildly spiraling tornado aimed straight for our barn') rather than telling what happened ('It was scary').
- I filled my paper with interesting tidbits that make reading it fun and lively.
- I made sure my topic was small enough to handle. "All about Baseball" was too big – I change it to "How to Steal a Base".
- I could easily answer the question, "What is the point of this paper/story?"

3. Paper-Some Really Good Parts, Some Not There Yet

The reader usually knows what I mean. Some parts will be better when I tell just a little more about what is important.

- Some of the things I said are new, but other things everyone knows already.
- Some details I have used are pretty general, like: "Her hat was nice," or "It was a sunny day."
- I think my topic might be too big and I got bogged down trying to tell a little about a lot instead of a lot about a little.
- Sometimes I was very clear about what I meant, but at other times, it was still fuzzy.

1. Paper-Just Beginning to Figure Out What I Want to Say

When someone else reads my paper, it will be hard for them to understand what I mean or what it is all about.

- I haven't shared much information. I guess I don't know enough yet about this topic to write about it.
- My details are so vague it is hard to picture anything.
- I'm still thinking aloud on paper. I'm looking for a good idea.
- Maybe I'll write about this, but then, maybe I'll write about that...

Organization

I look back and forth and see potential endings and title and leads. I'm looking for a trail through the material I have...

- Donald Murray

Without a clear trail, your ideas collapse or crash into each other. It is the organization that gives your writing direction and it helps the reader move through the ideas in a purposeful way.

Begin with a strong lead so you hook the reader right off the bat. Don't settle for "Once upon a time" or "My paper is all about dogs." Think about your lead working like a fishing lure or fly that dangles right in front of the nose of a fish until it just can't resist and take a big, committed bite. Ahhh, gottcha!

If you take a look at your whole piece of writing, **it should carefully build** to the most important moment or point you are trying to make. Toss your reader interesting details that work like stepping stones – each getting the reader closer and closer to the key idea or event.

The **order of your details** is really important too. Ideas shouldn't dive-bomb the reader out of the blue; they should come together with a strong connecting line back to the main idea.

Watch out for getting bogged down in trivial details (what color the hero's socks were, or whether she had milk on her cereal). Keep moving right along. And when you reach the end of a story or make your last point, **STOP!** Make that last sentence count by leaving the reader with something to think about. Good endings are tough, but don't fall into the pit with "And I woke up and it was only a dream," or "Now you know the three reasons why Americans should car pool." Readers won't feel satisfied with these ending and *neither will you*.

Organization is the hardest trait.

- K-12 Student Writers Across America

Organization

5. Paper-Clear and Compelling Direction

I've chosen an order that works well and makes the reader want to find out what's coming next.

- My beginning gets the reader's attention and gives clues about what is coming.
- Every detail adds a little more to the main idea or story
- All my details are in the right place; everything fits like a puzzle
- I ended at a good spot and didn't drag on too long. I left my reader with something to think about.

3. Paper-Some Really Smooth Parts, Others Need Work

The order of my story/paper makes sense most of the time.

- I have a beginning, but it really doesn't grab you or give you clues about what is coming.
- Sometimes it is not clear how the details I have used connect to the main idea or story.
- Some of my details are in the right spot, but some should come earlier or later.
- I've lingered too long in some places, and sped through others.
- I have a conclusion, it just isn't the way I want it yet. I may have gone on too long or just tried to sum up in a ho hum way.

1. Paper-Not Shaped Yet

The order in my paper is jumbled and confused. I'm feeling dizzy!

- There isn't really a beginning or ending to my paper. It just kind of "takes off..."
- I'm confused about how the details fit with the main idea or story.
- My ideas seem scrambled, jumbled and disconnected. It's confusing.
- Conclusion? Oops, I forgot.

Voice

Voice separates writing that is read from writing that is not read...Voice is the writer revealed.

- Donald Murray

Voice is YOU coming through your writing. It's what gives your writing **personality, flavor, style** – a sound all its own. Only you can give your writing this special touch because no one else sees the world quite the way you do. Pretty neat, huh! Your voice is as distinctively yours as your fingerprints.

Honesty is important to create in your writing. You must say what you truly think and feel – not what you think someone else might want to hear. This takes courage. You must write from the inside out from that part of you that's in touch with your feelings. This means you need to know yourself, listen to yourself, and trust those thoughts and feelings. Sometimes, the very act of writing will help you discover what you truly think and feel. It's risky, a bit scary, and exciting too.

Think about your reader as you write. Write directly to that person just as if he or she were standing there talking to you. Be yourself. Don't try to impress the reader. Readers will respond to your sincerity, honesty, and conviction.

Are you doing a paper on sea urchins? Bungee jumping? Geometric shapes? Lightning? Dancing? Write with confidence, as if you know what you're talking about and it is **utterly fascinating**; your enthusiasm will be contagious and will draw the reader in to your writer's web of ideas and feelings.

Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader...not the fact that it's raining, but the feel of being rained upon.

- E.L. Doctorow

Voice

5. Paper-Really Individual and Powerful

My paper has lots of personality. It sounds different from the way anyone else writes.

- I have put my personal stamp on this paper; it's really me! Readers can tell I am talking right to them.
- I write with confidence and sincerity.
- My paper feels full of feelings and my reader will feel what I feel
- I'm not afraid to say what I really think.
- You can tell that I wrote this. No one else sounds like this!

3. Paper-Individuality Fades In and Out

What I truly think and feel only shows up sometimes.

- Although readers will understand what I mean, it won't make them feel like laughing, crying or pounding on the table.
- My writing is right on the edge of being funny, excited, scary or downright honest – but it's not there yet.
- My personality pokes through here and there, but the gets covered up again.
- My writing is pleasant, but a little cautious.
- I've done a lot of telling and not enough showing.

1. Paper-Not Yet Me

I'm not comfortable sharing what I truly think and feel yet.

- If you didn't already know, it might be hard to tell who wrote this paper; you can't really hear my voice in there yet.
- I'm not comfortable taking a risk by telling you what I really think – I've taken the safest route by hiding my true feelings.
- My paper is all telling and no showing at all.
- I've held myself back by using general statements like: "It was fun," "She was nice," "I like him a lot."

Word Choice

I do not choose the right word, I get rid of the wrong one.

- A.E. Houseman

As you read and listen to other people speak, you cultivate a rich vocabulary of **precise and colorful words** that let you say exactly what you want – not come close, but nail it right on the head. This is the essence of good word choice. Every new word increases your power.

“But there are so many words to learn; where do I begin?” you might ask. In his book, *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser says, “Verbs are the most important of all your tools. They push the sentence forward and give it momentum...flail, poke, dazzle, squash, beguile, pamper, swagger, wheedle, vex. Probably no other language has such a vast supply of verbs so bright with color.” Learn to **develop a critical eye toward the verbs** in your work. Are they active, powerful, full of energy and pizzazz?

Keep the vocabulary natural. Never write to impress or you’ll end up with sentences like this: “He cultivated his way into the kitchen,” or “Our friendship was highly lucrative.” See what happened? In an attempt to use words that were bigger, these writers forgot to make sure they made sense. A thesaurus can be a good friend to a writer, but only if used sparingly and with thought.

Your writing works best with **specific words, carefully chosen to create a vivid picture in the reader’s mind.** Play around with the words until they sound good. Don’t say, “The dog was big and mean.” Say, “A hundred pounds of snarling yellow fur launched itself from the porch, straining at a rope thin as spaghetti.” Now that’s something we can see happening!

The race in writing is not to the swift, but to the original.

- William Zinsser

Word Choice

5. Paper-Extremely Clear, Visual, and Accurate

I picked just the right words for just the right places.

- All the words in my paper fit. Each one seems just right.
- My words are colorful, snappy, vital, brisk and fresh. You won't find overdone, vague, or flowery language.
- Look at all my energetic verbs!
- Some of the words and phrases are so vivid that the reader won't be able to forget them.

3. Paper-Correct But Not Striking

The words in my paper get the message across, but don't capture anyone's imagination or attention.

- I used everyday words pretty well, but I didn't stretch for a new or better way to say things.
- Most of the time the reader will figure out what I mean even if a few words are goofed up.
- Occasionally, I may have gone a bit overboard with words that tried to impress the reader.
- My words aren't really specific. Instead of saying, "The sun went down" I should have said, "The sun sagged into the treetops." Better, juicier details were needed!
- There are as many tired out clichés ("Bright and early," "Quick as a wink") as there are new, fresh original phrases: "My mother made me feel more special than all her potted plants."

1. Paper-Confusing, Misused Words, and Phrases Abound

My reader is often asking, "What did you mean by this?"

- A lot of my words and phrases are vague: "We liked to do things," "We were friends and stuff."
- My words don't make pictures yet. "Something neat happened," "It was awesome."
- Some of my words are misapplication – Oops, I mean misused.
- Over and over I used the same words, over and over, and then over and over again until my paper was over.

Sentence Fluency

“Clarity, Clarity, clarity. When you become hopelessly mired in a sentence, it is best to start fresh...”

- **Strunk and White**
The Elements of Style

Read what you write aloud and **listen to the rhythm of the language**. Do you like what you hear? Does it make you sit up and take notice, or are you lulled to sleep by the sing-song sameness of each sentence pattern? Writers who read a lot notice that they develop a feeling for sentences that some people call “sentence sense.” It’s that sense that there’s more than one way to say a thing – but some ways just sound better than others.

Your sentences should be clear; they should make sense. **Cut the deadwood**. Don’t say: “At this point in time, we feel we are about ready to begin to fight.” Say, “Now we’re ready to fight.” Make every word work hard and your sentences will be powerful, full of punch.

Notice how your sentences begin. These beginnings are repetitive and boring: “We went to the beach. We had fun. We saw seagulls. We went home.” Yawn! Vary the openings and combine very short sentences: “Despite being overrun with pesky seagulls, we had fun at the beach.”

Don’t let sentences drift on too long, either. If a sentence feels unwieldy, out of control, slice it in half. Make two sentences. As William Zinsser tells us, “There is no minimum length for a sentence that’s acceptable...Among good writers it is the short sentence that predominates.”

Read your work aloud and listen to the rhythm and flow of the words. Does the fluency match the mood and content? Long and flowing where the piece is descriptive and thoughtful; short and snappy where you need to make a point.

To write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write.

- **Gertrude Stein**

Sentence Fluency

1. Paper-Varied and Natural

The sentences in my paper are clear and delightful to read aloud.

- Some sentences are long and stretchy, while some are short and snappy.
- It's easy to read my paper aloud. I love the sound.
- Sentence beginnings vary; they show how ideas connect.
- You can tell that I have good 'sentence sense' because my paper just flows.
- All excess baggage has been cut. I've economized with words.

3. Paper-Routine and Functional

Some sentences are choppy or awkward, but most are clear.

- Some of my sentences are smooth and natural, but others are halting.
- Sentence beginnings are more alike than different.
- I need to add linking words (Therefore... Later... For this reason... When this happened...) to show how sentences connect.
- Some sentences should merge; others need to be cut in two.
- I have used more words than necessary ~ I still need to trim some deadwood.

1. Paper-Needs Work

Because there isn't enough 'sentence sense' yet, this paper is difficult to read aloud, even with practice.

- As I read my paper, I have to go back, stop, and read over, just to figure out the sentence.
- I'm having a hard time telling where one sentence stops and another begins.
- The sentence patterns in my paper are so repetitive they might put my reader to sleep!
- I have to do quite a bit of oral editing (leaving some words out, putting some others in) just to help the listener get the meaning.

Conventions

The first editor of any piece is always the writer...

- **Nancie Atwell**
In the Middle

EDITING. Conventions are the rules of language ~ *Spelling, Punctuation, Grammar/Usage, Paragraphing, and Capitalization* ~ that make your text correct and easy for others to read. When you follow the rules, readers don't need to waste energy mentally editing; they can pay attention to your clever ideas, creative organization, unique voice, vibrant word choice, and lyrical fluency.

Conventions are different from the first five traits (Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice and Sentence Fluency) because to improve those traits you have been learning how to revise ~ how to *rethink* and *re-see* your work. **Editing** is *fixing* ~ **making sure the text is as error-free as possible**. The purpose is to make your paper readable to someone else. Sometimes mistakes in conventions get in the way and keep the reader from understanding your message. They also irritate some readers – something no writer sets out to do deliberately!

Editing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.

- **Mark Twain**

Develop a proofreader's eye. Check everything. Then check it again. It's often hard to spot your own mistakes. Try reading aloud; it makes you slow down. You may also find it helpful to have someone else look at your work. Editing is a skill in itself – quite a bit different from writing. To be a good editor you must practice. Teach yourself to read slowly, and with care. Be honest; dare to see what is.

One of the hardest tasks of the writer is to read what is on the page, not what the writer hoped would be on the page.

- **Donald Murray**

Conventions

5. Paper-Mostly Correct

There are very few errors in my paper; it wouldn't take long to get this ready to publish.

- I have used capitals correctly.
- Periods, commas, exclamation marks, and quotation marks are in the right places.
- My spelling is accurate.
- Every paragraph is indented to show where a new idea begins.
- My grammar/usage is consistent and shows control.

3. Paper-About Halfway Home

A number of bothersome mistakes in my paper need to be cleaned up before I am ready to publish.

- Spelling is correct on simple words. It may not always be right on the harder words.
- Most sentences and proper nouns begin with capitals, but a few have been overlooked.
- Paragraphs are present, but not all begin in the right spots.
- A few problems with grammar and punctuation might make a reader stumble or pause now and again.
- My paper reads like a first draft; I was more concerned with getting my ideas down than making sure all the editing was taken care of.

1. Paper-Editing Not Under Control Yet

It would take a first reading to decode, and then a second reading to get the meaning of my paper.

- Spelling error our commun, evin on simpl werdz.
- My paper, have errors in punctuation? And grammar that send the reader back two the beginning from asentence to sort thing out
- I've got capital LETTErs scattered All Over tHe pLaCe or NOT at all.
- I haven't got the hang of paragraphs yet.
- The truth is, I haven't spent much time editing this paper.

Presentation

Presentation is literally how the piece of writing looks on the page. If the reader can't tell what you are trying to say because your handwriting is careless, too slanted, loopy, or tiny, it makes the task of understanding your message just that much harder, or even impossible. Handwriting is an important quality of the final presentation of your piece and so, if you have problems here, think about writing your piece on the word processor so it is easier to read.

Using a word processor can be a big help in presentation. Watch out, however, for overuse of all those really cool fonts (2 per page is usually the maximum) or overuse of pictures, graphs and charts. Remember, the whole key to success in working with presentation is to make your piece INVITING to the reader – not cause them a migraine!

Here's another tip for making your paper look good as the reader prepares to take the plunge...use lots of white space to set up your text in the best possible way. Think of it as framing the words – top, sides and bottom margins need to be appropriately sized. Beware of the margin dribble, where words just get closer and closer to the edge of the page until the whole piece looks like it was written on a slant!

Depending on the type of writing, you may want to include some sign posts along the way to help the reader clearly understand the message. If you are writing a list – number it. If you are making a series of points that all fit together – use bullets to guide the reader's eye. How about page numbers? Would they be helpful? Has the teacher given you specific instructions for how the piece should look when it is finished? FOLLOW THEM! Same goes for pictures, charts, graphs, etc. They are very helpful if the reader understands why they are there and that they make sense.

Ask yourself, is this the best I can do? Will the reader WANT to read this because the presentation attracts them to the page? The answer should be YES!

“I can't read this Do it over.”
- Thomas Jefferson's mother...(just kidding!)

Presentation

5. Paper-Visually clear and pleasing to the eye

The way I place everything on my page makes it easier for the reader to understand what I am trying to say.

- My letters and words are written neatly. My letters slant in the same direction and stay on the line. There is enough space between the words.
- If I am using my computer, I will choose a readable font and font size.
- My spaces and margins around my text help the reader focus on my writing.
- When I use graphs, charts or drawings they will have a definite purpose to help the reader understand the text.

3. Paper-Readable, but can use some improvements

There are a few messy areas on my paper that need to be changed before I publish.

- My handwriting is readable, although some parts are easier to read than others.
- Some of my font sizes are fine – I have gone overboard on others.
- I have not made a frame around my text. My margins are crowded or I may have used one margin and forgotten about the other.
- It may be hard for the reader to connect my visuals to the text.
- I have included some titles, numbers and bullets but I do not use them as often or with as much control as I should.

1. Paper-Whew! Almost impossible to read

The text is difficult to read and understand because of its placement on the page.

- OOPS! My spacing is uneven and some of my words run together.
- My letters slant different ways and are not well formed.
- I am having too much fun with fonts – they are not always the right *style* and size for what I am writing.
- I use very few titles, numbers, or bullets to help my reader connect one section of the text to another.