

Less is (Still) More: Effective Writing for the Settlement Sector

**A handbook for the Community Integration Network
Prepared by Vin Heney - March 2012**

Based on the workshop *Less is (Still) More: Writing for the Public and the Personal*
(Delivered by Vin Heney on Dec. 5, 2011 & Mar. 12, 2012, Toronto, ON)



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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Getting the Pen Moving	4
Freeflow Writing	4
Mindmap.....	5
3. Write Simply	5
Writing with Concision.....	5
Eliminating Redundancies	6
Rules for Functional Writing	6
4. Writing for the Settlement Sector.....	7
Email	7
Flyers & Brochures	8
Blogs & Social Media	9
Newsletters	9
Reports.....	10
Grant Applications.....	11
5. Last But Not Least.....	11
6. Activity Solutions	12
Bibliography	13

1. Introduction

*“People are doing you a favour by reading what you write.
Don’t make them work too hard.”*

–Robert D. Smith

Create a blog, send an email, write a report, craft a tweet, share a memo, design a flyer, develop a newsletter, etc., etc., etc. There are more ways than ever to communicate in the workplace, but when it comes to the written word, the golden rule still applies: Keep it simple.

This handbook will look at the most common writing demands of the settlement sector, as well as provide exercises to help strengthen your writing and sharpen your message. Links to additional resources will also be provided throughout the workbook. Grab a seat (and a pen!) and let the games begin.

2. Getting the Pen Moving

Often the hardest part of writing is getting the first thought down; the blank page – or screen – can be intimidating. The trick is to get the pen moving. Odds are you have more things to say than you think. So how to open the floodgate? Here are two exercises that can help facilitate any kind of writing.

1. Freeflow Writing

One of the first things that all aspiring writers and journalists learn is freeflow writing. It’s essentially writing without editing, revising or stopping – a stream of consciousness that gets captured in real time. With a bit of practice you’ll find this to be a useful warm-up and a great way to get your thoughts on the page and temporarily shut down our editing mind. Freeflow writing can either be *focused* (about a particular topic) or *loose* (not about a particular topic). It’s up to you. In writing workshops, I usually provide the group with a prompt (ie. “*When I think of writing...*” or “*The best part of my job is...*”) and then challenge them to write non-stop for 3 or 4 minutes. Freeflow writing can be completely personal – you don’t have use or share any of it, but be warned: the quality of the writing may surprise you! Sometimes all it takes is a little freedom for the thoughts to come flowing out.

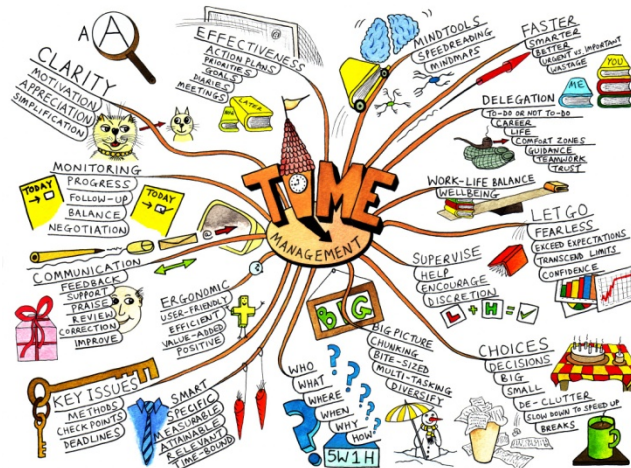
Resources:

<http://rosalindadam.blogspot.com/p/page-3-free-flow-writing.html>

<http://voices.yahoo.com/how-freeflow-writing-will-cure-writers-2550309.html>

2. Mind Map

Similar to freeflow writing, mind maps are a stream of consciousness. In this case, however, the activity is always based on a single topic. For example, if you wanted to create a mind map based on work-related stress, you would put 'work-related stress' in the centre of your page, and branch out with multiple related topics (ie. causes, prevention, support, etc.). Each word builds on the next, until you have thematic groups of keywords all related to various elements of a central theme. It is essentially an organized brainstorm of terms for a given topic – which will come in handy when you begin writing about that topic more formally. Here's an example of what a mind map might look like:



Resources:

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newISS_01.htm

<http://writetodone.com/2008/12/01/how-to-use-a-genius-tool-for-writers-mind-maps/>

3. Write Simply

You will find that the most clear and concise writing is often the hardest to produce. We sometimes develop sentences that are unnecessarily wordy and use words that are redundant. But fear not: when it comes to writing, a few tips can go a long way. Here are some short exercises that will help you keep it simple.

Writing with concision

Try to re-write the following sentences in a more concise manner. Keep in mind the level of detail required will depend on the context, but often in the professional settings, getting straight to the point is preferable:

Example #1

The last time I watched the Toronto Maple Leafs play they were brutally defeated in a totally lopsided game. / The last time I saw the Toronto Maple Leafs they were sorely defeated.

Example #2

Working at the Welcome Center is truly the best because all of the staff there are so supportive and helpful and understanding. / It is a pleasure working at the Welcome Centre because of its supportive work environment.

1. It was not until my client arrived that we came to the decision to commute across the city and speak to the immigration lawyer.
2. After conducting in-depth interviews with a number of possible candidates for the position of recreationalist, we have decided to offer the job to you.

*Solutions on pg. 10

Eliminating Redundancies

Eliminate unnecessary words from the following sentences:

Example #1

It is ~~absolutely~~ necessary that the public ~~masses~~ be made aware of the ~~actual~~ facts pertaining to ~~the issue regarding toxic~~ air pollution.

Example #2

My ~~fellow~~ colleagues and I are ~~fully~~ satisfied with the ~~advanced~~ planning that has ~~already~~ occurred for tomorrow night's evening event – I think we are on the verge of a ~~major~~ breakthrough.

1. In the final outcome, we expect to see that important foreign imports will continue to maintain a positive current trend.
2. The environmental committee will refer back to its minutes to learn more about the past history of this vitally important project.

*Solutions on pg. 10

Rules for Functional Writing

Here are four rules to keep in mind when writing for a professional audience:

1. *Know your audience*
 - It is impossible to communicate effectively if you do not understand your audience. Where do they interact? What are their preferred methods of communication? What are their specific needs?
2. *Know yourself*
 - What do you want to come from your written communication? Be crystal clear on this before sharing your message. If you're unclear about what you're saying, others will be too.
3. *K.I.S.S.*
 - Keep it simple, sweetheart. People are usually too busy to read a lengthy written document at work, so be sure to keep it short and sweet. Boil your message down to the most important points, and develop the most targeted and professional message possible. But before you send it...
4. *Revise, Revise, Revise*
 - Always re-read your written work before sharing it. If it's an especially important email or written communication, ask a co-worker to read it and offer feedback – it can only get better.

*Remember, your writing says a great deal about yourself and your organization, so always aim to create communications that are as professional and respectful as possible.

4. Writing for the Settlement Sector

OK, now that you're warmed up and know what kind of writing to strive for, let's look at some of the common writing demands of the settlement sector.

Email

- Email is perhaps the writing we do the most and think of the least. Whether as a follow-up to a staff meeting or the first impression with a prospective client, Email is an important platform for daily written communication. Here are a few tips:
 - Use the subject line to include detailed and relevant information (ex. *Subject: Reminder of 11am Meeting, Tues, Mar. 12, on Vacation Policy*). This way the recipient can easily understand the nature of the message.

- Never respond to an email if you are angry. Draft your response in Word (to avoid accidental delivery) and re-visit your response in an hour or so. Are you representing yourself in the best and most professional manner? Could you be more thoughtful or calm? If you are still upset, it might be best to pick up the phone instead of responding via email – once you press ‘send’ you cannot take it back.
- Use exclamation marks sparingly! Used occasionally, they can be effective, but if overused, they quickly lose their impact!
- Dear? Hello? Hi? It can be difficult to determine the best way to begin an email. Though it may seem overly formal, I recommend using ‘Dear’ when communicating with people you do not know well. After the initial interaction, follow the cues from their responses – you will usually end up using ‘Hello’ or ‘Hi.’ *When in doubt, err on the side of formality.*
- The same is true when signing off: ‘Sincerely’ or ‘Regards’ are both professional and are considered appropriate in most situations. When you have a better idea the degree of formality necessary, you might opt to use less formal salutations such as ‘Cheers’ or ‘Talk to you soon’. Again, err on the side of formality at first.

Resources:

<http://www.dynamoo.com/technical/etiquette.htm>

<http://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/hello-hi-oh-dear>

<http://thinksimplenow.com/productivity/15-tips-for-writing-effective-email/>

Flyers & Brochures

- Despite the shift to digital communications, flyers and brochures are still a useful way to promote events or share information about programs. Keep the following tips in mind:
 - Be sure to keep the language simple. Try to avoid using acronyms and abbreviations – they can be confusing!
 - Consider the hierarchy of information – the most important piece of information should be big and clear. The next most important should be less central, and so on. The audience should immediately know where to look if they want to learn more detailed information.
 - Think of an enticing catchphrase (ie. ‘language is the key’ for a conversation circle, or ‘don’t buy a bike, *build* one’ for a bicycle maintenance program, etc.). This helps to draw the audience in.
 - Too many different font types can be awkward to read – keep things consistent.
 - Remember the call to action. If it is an event, make sure the time/date/location is clear. If it is a program, include contact information or website.
 - Try to make the flyer or brochure visually appealing. Look to volunteers, co-workers, or willing clients to help with this. There are probably some artistically inclined individuals in your workplace, and

seeking involvement can help foster a sense of ownership of the program or event.

- Don't forget to include necessary logos (ie. funders, sponsors).

Resources:

<http://www.businessknowhow.com/marketing/flyer.htm>

<http://www.squidoo.com/flyerdesign>

<http://ezinearticles.com/?Tips-For-Printing-Flyers-to-Promote-Your-Business&id=4646582>

Blogs & Social Media

- Blogs and social media are very powerful tools – they're free, easy to use, and great for connecting with your audience. But it can be hard to know where to start. Consider these points when creating a social media strategy:
 - Sometimes too much written information can be a turnoff, especially if your audience has English (or French) as a second language. One engagement strategy is to share photos with your audience through a Flickr site. Everyone loves to see pictures of themselves and their community, and this is a great way to stay in touch with your client base will documenting your events and activities.
 - Another way to engage your audience and generate buzz is through a client- or volunteer-run blog. This is a fun way for your audience to develop valuable writing skills and familiarity with online tools. It is also an opportunity for clients or volunteers to take ownership over a given program and to contribute to it success. But remember to keep it updated! An idle blog is a dead blog.
 - 'Microblogs,' such as Twitter, are also powerful tools. Even if your clients are not regularly using Twitter, odds are that many of your partnering organizations are. It is a great way to build relationships with partners and promote your organization in a timely, affordable *and* professional (yes, professional!) manner. Twitter is also a great way to cross-promote: If you have a new blog post or Flickr album, let people know about it through Twitter. The more ways you can get your message out, the better.
 - Facebook is another hugely popular online platform. Much like Twitter, Facebook can be used to connect with diverse audiences and discuss upcoming initiatives.
 - Keep in mind all of these tools are conversation-based; if you choose to use them, remember to keep them updated and to engage in regular and timely conversations with other users. This often means assigning one or two staff/volunteers to be responsible for your social media presence.

Resources:

<http://theedublogger.com/2009/01/04/quick-start-tips-for-new-flickr-users-part-i/>

<http://www.startingablog.com/>

<http://www.rositacortez.com/social-media-101/twitter/creating-an-effective-twitter-profile/>

Newsletters

- Newsletters are still a popular way to tell a story and connect with an audience, whether they are distributed in print or online. Here are a few tips:
 - Be realistic about how often you can produce a newsletter – the key is quality over quantity. So whether it's monthly, quarterly, or yearly, always produce content of value, on a consistent basis.
 - Just stating the facts can get boring. Try to spice it up with an engaging story or a testimonial from a client. Or better yet, have a client or volunteer write a section on their own.
 - Break up the newsletter into different sections – this makes it easier for the reader to follow along.
 - Try to include a range of information related to your program or organization – this keeps the newsletter diverse and broadens its appeal.
 - Always have a way for readers to engage. This could mean a column for readers' contributions or a link to your Twitter or your blog. As with social media, it's important to have two-way conversations, as opposed to a one-way flow of information.

Resources:

http://www.topstory.ca/newsletters.html#.T203L1G_za4

<http://www.gottaquirk.com/2009/11/05/top-tips-for-writing-a-newsletter-that-rocks/>

Reports

- Almost every professional setting – including the settlement sector – requires the production of reports. Reports can be used to give managers the 'big picture' of a program you're running or to demonstrate the activities of an organization to a funding body. Whatever the purpose, here are a few things to keep in mind:
 - Know your purpose in writing the report. Who is it for? What are they looking for? Who in the organization has written similar reports before? Would they be willing to offer support or advice? How should you organize the report?
 - Once you know what you need, create a mind map. This will help to ensure that you don't forget any important points.
 - Always keep the 'so what' in mind. For example, if you are writing a report about your last youth camping trip, it's not so much that 15 youth went on a camping trip, but that 15 youth left their comfort zones, prepared their own meals, challenged themselves physically and socially, and are now enrolled in a leadership program, making new friends, and building resiliency. Find the story in whatever it is you're doing. Why should the reader care?
 - Revise, revise, revise: First read it over yourself and then ask for a colleague's suggestions.

Resources:

<http://cec.vcn.bc.ca/cmp/modules/rep-btr.htm>

https://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/pdfs/2_assessmenttasks/super_report.pdf

[http://wiki.settlementatwork.org/wiki/Let's talk/CIC Reports and Literature Reviews](http://wiki.settlementatwork.org/wiki/Let's_talk/CIC_Reports_and_Literature_Reviews)

Grant Applications

- Granting bodies tend to look for specifics in grant applications. Because the window of acceptance is relatively narrow, it is important to know exactly what to include. Here are a few pointers:
 - Read (and re-read) the application outline. Is your organization eligible? What is the deadline? Be sure to prepare well in advance – it can be a lengthy process!
 - What exactly is the granting body looking for? Do a mind map and make a master checklist (with a schedule of tasks to keep you on track).
 - If you are unclear about something, contact the granting body. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification.
 - Work with a team – this is especially important for grant writing. Developing a well-rounded application is important, and colleagues will almost always bring new ideas to the table.
 - Use the granting bodies' own language. Often granting bodies will emphasize certain words or themes in their outlines; try to give them exactly what they are looking for. *Be creative, but within the parameters of the grant you are applying for.*
 - Read between the lines: In your own words, try to articulate what the granting body is looking for. This will help you steer the ship.

Resources:

<http://www.settlementatwork.org/rfp/93780>

<http://www.content-professionals.com/How-to-Write-a-Grant-Proposal.php>

<http://www.stepbystepfundraising.com/20-free-grant-writing-resources-non-profits/>

5. Last But Not Least

- Don't reinvent the wheel
 - It's all been done before! Use a template, learn from a workbook, or search online for a particular format. There is no room for guesswork.
- Reach Out
 - Local papers and small publications are always looking for content. Pitch ideas to editor – it can be an effective and affordable way to promote your efforts.
- Embrace social media

- Regardless of what you think about social media, it's here to stay, and it's not just for younger generations. Don't be afraid to try new tools and explore new ways to connect with your audience. You might be surprised at how much it resonates (with people of all ages).

6. Activity Solutions

***There are many different ways to re-work the following sentences. Here are some possible solutions:**

Writing with Concision:

1. It was not until my client arrived that we came to the decision to commute across the city and speak to the immigration lawyer.
When my client arrived, we decided to visit the immigration lawyer.
2. After conducting in-depth interviews with a number of possible candidates for the position of recreationalist, we have decided to offer the job to you.
After much deliberation, we have decided to offer you the position.

Eliminating Redundancies:

1. In the ~~final~~ outcome, we expect to see that important ~~foreign~~ imports will ~~continue to~~ maintain a positive ~~current~~ trend.
2. The environmental committee will refer ~~back~~ to its minutes to learn more about the ~~past~~ history of this ~~vitaly~~ important project.

Bibliography

Smith, R. D. (2011). *Becoming a Public Relations Writer: A Writing Workbook for Emerging and Established Media*. New York: Routledge.