



# Good writing skills as a cornerstone for career advancement

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Strong written communication skills are invaluable, even in a profession in which writing is not a key component. Good writing can be used as a tool to impart information or convince colleagues to pursue a particular course of action. It can also be a means of demonstrating one's creative and strategic thinking. In short, investing time in learning and refining strong writing skills is a crucial element of career advancement.

This article will provide tools and techniques for writing complete, correct, and concise documents. It will cover how one can identify and target the reader; organize the information; use online grammar, proofreading, and formatting tools; and write to inform, rather than impress, the reader.

## **Targeting the reader**

Have you ever been given a writing assignment but didn't know where to begin? A good technique for breaking through writer's block is to use the reader-centered question method.<sup>1</sup> The first step in this process is to write down the specific questions you think the reader would want addressed or answered.

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If you are not sure, then imagine yourself as the reader, with the same level of experience. Think about what specific information you would want to know.

After deciding on the questions,

- Write the answers to the questions,
- Group the questions and answers under headings,
- Write the document,
- Proofread the document,
- Use the Microsoft Word 365 command or an online tool to check the readability of the document, and
- Edit and/or redraft the document to refine and focus the content.

### Organizing content

The way the content is organized will determine how effectively the reader grasps it (**Table**, p. 3). Many people default to writing by using the stream-of-consciousness method. Writing that way may seem logical for the author. However, it makes the reader interpret a confusing, unstructured narrative, which will likely annoy the reader and diminish the intended impact and value of the content. This can result in wasted time for the reader and create a negative impression of the writer's organization. Below are good practices for writing well-organized regulatory correspondence:

- Start the document by clearly stating its purpose: "The purpose of this email [report, memo] is to request [discuss, demonstrate] ..."
- End the introduction by outlining how the content will be organized: "The information is presented under the following headings: Background, Mission and purpose, Feasibility research; Findings and analysis, Costs, Discussion and recommendations, and Conclusion."
- Be proactive by including information about references to previous correspondence or reports in the current document. The reader likely has many documents to plough through on any given day. Facilitate engagement with the document by including the referenced information so the reader does not have to waste time searching for it.
- Consider what the document will look like when viewed on a smartphone.
- Increase the reader's ability to absorb the information quickly by:
  - Grouping related information into short topics,
  - Creating headings in boldface type that describe the substance of the topic, and
  - Inserting white space between the topics.

### Grammar, proofreading, and formatting

No one appreciates reading a document full of typos and incorrect word usage. It confuses the reader and reflects poorly on the author. Using the following proofreading practices will help reduce the number of errors in a document and increase the reader's confidence in the accuracy of the correspondence.

**Table. Organizing content: Unstructured vs. structured**

Memo 1 – Unstructured
<p>I request permission to attend the 2021 Annual Meeting on Oct. 6-8, 2021, in Washington, DC. Over 2000 industry and government officials will attend this meeting. My job involves understanding how the FDA will be implementing its new initiatives. The meeting will allow me to meet FDA regulators and find out what they're doing. When I return to the office, I'll distribute a trip report, so the other staff members can learn about the material that was presented. The regular registration fee is \$1695. The early bird registration fee is \$1445. The cost for travel and lodging will be \$1200. I'll be out of the office from October 5 - 8. The deadline for early-bird registration is Friday, September 10. If you are able to approve my request, I would appreciate your letting me know by that time so that I can pay the reduced fee of \$1445. Thank you.</p>
Memo 2 – Structured
<p><b>Request to attend 2021 annual conference</b> I request permission to attend the 2021 Annual Conference on Oct. 6-8 in Washington, DC.</p> <p><b>Benefit</b> More than 2,000 industry and government officials will attend this meeting. My job involves understanding how the FDA will be implementing its new initiatives. The meeting will allow me to meet FDA regulators and find out what they're doing. When I return to the office, I'll distribute a trip report, so the other staff members can learn about the material that was presented.</p> <p><b>Cost and time out of the office</b> The regular registration fee is \$1,695. The early bird registration fee is \$1,445. The cost for travel and lodging will be \$1,200. I'll be out of the office from Oct. 5-8.</p> <p><b>Next steps</b> The deadline for early-bird registration is Friday, September 10. If you're able to approve my request, I would appreciate your letting me know by that time so that I can pay the reduced fee of \$1,445.</p> <p>Thank you</p>

Always:

- Use spellcheck and autocorrect but understand they do not catch every error – and sometimes create new ones. Online tools such as Grammarly<sup>2</sup> provide suggestions to help with spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage.
- Proofread the document by listening to a computer read the document to you. Microsoft Word contains a “Read Aloud” feature. Alternatively, the online tool, TTS Reader,<sup>3</sup> which will read a document aloud with various accents.
- Remove extra spaces between words by using an online tool such as TextFixer<sup>4</sup> and remove extra spaces between paragraphs, by using an online tool such as Text Fixer Line Break Removal Tool.<sup>5</sup>

## Write to express, not impress

The reader needs to understand your message quickly and easily. Using long, complicated sentences with complex words will likely alienate the reader and erode the ability to understand the content. Good practices for writing clear and concise regulatory correspondence include:

- Use the active voice in 90% of your writing.<sup>6</sup>
- Write in the active voice to emphasize the person whose actions are being described: “Mike Smith inspected the Bates Company.”
- Write in the passive voice to emphasize the activity that was done: “The Bates Company was inspected.” Use the passive voice if it is not known who did the action or the actor is not relevant.
- Improve readability by using shorter words and sentences. Sentences can be shortened by removing adjectives, adverbs, and redundant phrases.
  - Don’t write: “It is much more desirable to provide intrinsic and extrinsic value to others than to be engaged in accepting the generous, magnanimous, and benevolent favors dispensed willingly by others.”
  - Write: “It is better to give than receive.”
- Ensure that the average sentence length does not exceed 17 words.
- Write so that a reader with a grade 10-12 education and at least 40% of the US population can understand its contents.
- Check the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level,<sup>6</sup> Flesch Reading Ease<sup>6</sup> of a document, and its percentage of verbs in the passive tense in Microsoft Word 365. To do this:
  - Click on File in the Home toolbar at the top of the screen.
  - Click on Options at the bottom of the blue panel on the left of the screen.
  - Click on Proofing.
  - Under the section, “When correcting spelling and grammar in Word,” click on “Show readability statistics.”
  - Click OK.
  - After writing the document, click Review on the Home toolbar.
  - Click on Spelling & Grammar.
  - After considering the suggestions provided by Spelling & Grammar, the statistics will appear.
- Consider online tools that will provide much of this information, including Test Document Readability.<sup>6,7</sup>

## Conclusion

Companies that encourage their employees to communicate clearly are more productive and have a higher employee satisfaction rate. The ability to write clear, complete, and accurate documents can help advancement as a regulatory professional. Professionals who have mastered the skills of good, effective writing can, become role models and mentors to their colleagues. They demonstrate the point made by Dr. Robert D. Smith, who said, “People are doing you a favor by reading what you write. Don’t make them work too hard.”<sup>8</sup>

### About the author

**Nancy Singer, JD, LLM, RAC, FRAPS**, founded Compliance-Alliance LLC in 2004 to specialize in the professional development for employees working in the government and in medical product companies. She is an adjunct assistant professor at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences and has taught classes at Johns Hopkins University, University of Southern California, and Harvard Symposia. Singer presently teaches classes for FDA staff colleges and FDA district offices. She previously served as special counsel for the Advanced Medical Technology Association. Singer has received Vice President Gore's Reinventing Government Hammer Award and the FDA Commissioner's Special Citation in recognition of her efforts to improve communication between the government and the regulated industry. She began her career as an attorney with the US Department of Justice, doing litigation for FDA enforcement cases. Subsequently, she was a partner at the law firm of Kleinfeld Kaplan and Becker. Singer is a retired commander in the US Navy Reserve. She can be contacted at [nancy@compliance-alliance.com](mailto:nancy@compliance-alliance.com).

**Citation** Singer N. Good writing skills as a cornerstone for career advancement. REGULATORY FOCUS. March 2021. Regulatory Affairs Professionals Society.

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