

# **How to write and manage writing tasks:**

*Tips for municipal clerks*

Ideas on writing better, faster, and with  
less teeth-gnashing and garment-rending

*Matthew Maguire*

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## **Before we start: Some goals**

- Overcoming writer's block and procrastination.
- Writing faster.
- Organizing larger writing projects.
- Revising documents quickly and strategically.
- Treating clarity as achievable and measurable.
- Using computer tricks, shortcuts, boilerplate, and templates.

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## First: Three key insights on writing

1. Good writers master 3 kinds of **technique**:
  - ✓ Essay-level macro technique.
  - ✓ Sentence-level micro technique.
  - ✓ Process-management technique.
2. Mastery of all three kinds of technique can be **measured** and/or **seen at a glance**.
3. These techniques will benefit **writers who learn and use them – and their bosses**.

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### 1. Write first and write fast.

- Good writers write well. Professional writers write well *fast*. That's a crucial difference.
- It's easier to rewrite than to write. So:
  - ✓ Embrace *writing* as the first step in writing.
  - ✓ Write your first draft as fast as you can.
  - ✓ Don't stop when you don't know an answer.
  - ✓ Let your first draft *stink*. **No, really.**

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## 2. Give your draft a visible frame.

- Visible outlining organizes your thoughts *and* shows that organization to readers.
- **Always** start with a first-paragraph summary.
- Organize sections of your draft with **bold-faced headings, italicized subheadings, and bulleted lists.**
- Don't know? Keep writing. Indicate *precisely* what will come later [in brackets like this].

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## 3. Gather information *after* framing.

- A properly framed first draft will –
  - ✓ **Make research easier.** It clarifies thoughts on what you need and who can provide it.
  - ✓ **Make research more focused.** All your queries will be more clear and precise.
  - ✓ **Minimize under-reporting.** Inadequate research is a key cause of weak writing.
  - ✓ **Turn a draft into a to-do list** for the project.

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#### 4. Write against measureable limits.

- Impose tough deadlines. Meet them.
- Limit total words and words per sentence.
- Limit sentence-structure options – for example, prefer **who-doeswhat** sentences.
- Limit your punctuation options.
- Address specific weaknesses in your writing.
- Make the task more fun.

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#### 5. Write for Mom and Dad.

- Write everything warmly, plainly, directly, truthfully, and without unexplained jargon.
- How do you know you've done that? If it reads like a note to your Mom.
- Write everything as if the reader were about to bark – as Dad used to – **Get to the point!**
- Write it as you'd say it – ***if*** the message, context, and audience were the same.

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## 6. Default to simple.

- Choose the simplest **outline**.
- Prefer the simplest **sentence structure**.
- Use the simplest **word**.
- Never write to show off. No one cares that you know what *primogenitor* means.
- Avoid unexplained jargon – even if you assume your audience understands it.

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## 7. Prefer who-doeswhat sentences.

- Start most sentences with the answer to the question who.
- Follow immediately with the answer to the question does what.
- The next best bet: A what-doeswhat sentence.
- The key: Understand that people care more about who, what, and why than they do about when, where, and how.

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## 8. Revise by reducing.

- Revising *is* reducing – that is, sharing ***all*** content in fewer words. Use specific metrics:
  - Shrink total word count.
  - Shrink words per sentence.
  - Shrink the length of chunks.
- Use ***sentence technique*** to reduce:
  - Omit needless words. Turn phrases into words.
  - Convey the key action in ***predicates***.
  - Dissect long sentences and complicated subjects.

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### Example: Improvement by reduction

- Imagine Caesar reporting triumph at Zela:
  - ✓ I led my troops to enemy territory and then the battlefield.
  - ✓ I surveilled the enemy, the landscape, and the battlefield.
  - ✓ I launched an attack. The fighting was fierce. We won.
- That's fine – but isn't this better?

✓ ***Veni.***

***I came.***

✓ ***Vidi.***

***I saw.***

✓ ***Vici.***

***I conquered.***



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## 9. Read it aloud.

- Read your prose aloud to complement conventional proofing. Don't just move your lips as you read. Don't just whisper. ***Hear it.***
- Your ears will catch things your eyes will miss –
  - Grammatical errors.
  - Structural weaknesses.
  - Lengthy sentences.
  - Problems with tone and voice.

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## 10. Put fresh eyes on it.

- Ask a friend and/or colleague to read or edit.
- Ask the colleague to use restrictions ***you*** used:
  - Any frame restrictions, such as a first-section summary.
  - Maximum word count.
  - Average words per sentence.
  - Deadline.
- In seeking fresh eyes, do ***not*** choose the boss or editor. The fresh eyes should be ***ignorant.***

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## Bonus tip: Autocorrect

- Use **autocorrect** to help write frequently used sentences, phrases, organization names, and so on – with just a few keystrokes.
  - ✓ **To create an autocorrect shortcut:** In Word, type *alt*, then *t*, then *a*. Add the shortcut in the left box and phrase to be created in the right.
  - ✓ **To use an autocorrect shortcut:** Type the shortcut.
- Autocorrect entries created in **any** Office program run in **all** Office programs.

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## Bonus tip: Macros

- Use **macros** for one-step execution of multiple commands – e.g., for formatting changes.
  - ✓ **To create a Word macro:** Type *alt*, then *w*, then *m*, and then *r*. Name it. Assign it a keyboard shortcut.
  - ✓ Execute all steps you want the macro to do.
  - ✓ Type – again – *alt w*, then *m*, and then *r* to stop recording and save the macro.
  - ✓ **To run a macro:** Type the keyboard shortcut.
- **Caution:** Honor all IT directives on macros.

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## Bonus tip: Quick parts

- Use **quick parts** to save larger copy chunks (>1 paragraphs) that you will regularly re-use.
  - ✓ **To create a quick part:** In Word, select copy you want to save as a quick part.
  - ✓ Type *alt*, then *n*, then *q*, then *s*. Name your quick part memorably, then click *ok*.
  - ✓ **To insert a quick part:** Type *alt*, then *n*, and then *q*. Move the cursor to the quick part. Hit *return*.
- **Advice:** Save words but not formatting.

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**Questions?**

**Thank you!**

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