

The Proof Angel Summary of

Writing resources: June 2014

Should you write a book?

They say there is a book in everyone. Some people assume that book would be fiction, but that is not necessarily the case.

Just as there are all sorts of books, there are all sorts of reasons for writing them. An author doesn't just benefit from the exercise of writing, the sales income generated by the project, or the warm glow of being a published author.

Potentially a wide variety of benefits flow from being an author. This post describes the ways a book can [boost your income](#).

How to write a book review

Book reviews make very good items for newsletters and blog posts.

When I was at junior school, this was the first task every Monday morning. For some reason we always had to start "The main characters in this story are..."

What we learn in school isn't always useful. Here is how to write a [proper book review](#).

Are you looking for an online writing course?

Do you feel your writing lacks a bit of zap? Need pointing in the right direction? Then have a look at these [free online writing courses](#).

How to write for an international audience

People all over the world use the English language, but there are many different regional variations. This can lead to complications when you are writing for an international audience. This post has some [useful tips](#).



Are you writing a press release?

Then this [check list for press releases](#) might be useful.

The Proof Angel is the trading name of Sarah Perkins, freelance editor and proofreader.

Words that ruin the flow

Here is a short list of [words & phrases](#) to avoid. They clog up your writing & add nothing to it. Except length.

Do you need to know about html?

Most of us can get away without knowing much about how html works. Occasionally it is a very useful thing to know.

If you are fundamentally not techy, how do you cope?

These posts are a good starting point:

- If you bear in mind that the beginning section is just showmanship, this post [gives some basic clues](#).
- [Wikipedia](#) gives a glossary & some practical examples, once you've scrolled past the history.
- Once you feel strong enough, you might want to read a post on [formatting an ebook](#).

How to avoid "very"

"Very" can be seen as a useful word. You can slip it into all sorts of places without too much thought.

Unfortunately, it is also quite a weak word. My first sentence could have been:

"Very" can be seen as a very useful word.

Now obviously that wouldn't be a sensible way to write, because now I've got very twice in the same sentence, but putting that aside:

- The statement is true. It is a very useful word, but
- does it really tell you anything else that was missing from the first sentence?

No, it doesn't. If you want to intensify, you need a stronger word, not an extra one. If you need a little extra help, [try this list](#).

How do communication problems happen?

There are 2 main causes:

- I naturally assume you know what I know. Doesn't everyone?
- I told you, but you didn't understand it for some reason.

Of course, using plain language helps, but it isn't always enough. This post has a good [analysis of the problems that arise](#), & some ideas to avoid them.

The best test is often to ask a question to make sure the penny has dropped. If you have explained a task to someone, leave them to get on with it for a short time (say half an hour or an hour), then go back and ask how they are getting on. By then you will be able to see if they are on the right track, & it gives them an opportunity to

ask questions that have occurred to them after they started to think about the process.

How to choose a font

The right font can make a big difference to the final result. Choosing a font used to be easy. Most of us had little or no choice. But now we all have a dazzling array before us. Many of the options eliminate themselves for most purposes by being too fanciful & difficult to read. That still leaves enough possibilities to be confusing.

This post has some [science behind how we read text](#), and some useful guidance about how to choose. I particularly like the idea of putting it together to see if you can tell the difference.

10 things to remember when writing a covering letter

Covering letters are needed for most job applications, and for many other documents. Mainly they are similar, but they should never be standard. Here are some things to bear in mind:

1. Don't quote your enclosure. The letter is there to get attention so the reader moves on to that enclosure. Don't steal your own thunder.
2. Think of the letter as a short essay on why the enclosure is important. You need to think what is in it for the reader, not what is in it for you. You need to convince them why they must hire you, or why they must read this report.
3. Think how you might react to a letter like yours. Letters making outrageous claims often go in the bin, as do letters telling the recipient what to do. Remember the power balance here.
4. Be clear about who you are. What makes you different? More importantly, how will you make a difference? Pick out your most important features for this job, but avoid making a list.
5. Using evidence has three benefits. It keeps you focused, gives you credibility, and stops you sounding arrogant. Vague statements about excellence get you nowhere. Make sure the evidence is relevant for this job, not merely generally impressive.
6. Don't quote the job description or other company literature, in the application or at an interview. Show you have researched the organisation in what you say. If you write a good letter, they will know you have good communication skills.
7. Use the letter as an opportunity to signpost important parts of the enclosure. This is particularly useful if you are sending a long report.
8. Keep it short.

9. Avoid jargon your reader may not understand.
10. Be positive.

Hiveword: a planning tool for writers

When you are planning a long piece, you need somewhere to jot things down. If your idea is hazy, or if the result will be complex, conventional techniques can get messy. Pieces of paper can get chaotic. Spreadsheets are useful, but although sorting is useful, after a while it gets complicated.

[Hiveword](#) is an on-line tool for novel planning, but it can be used for all sorts of writing. The advantages are:

- It keeps everything in one place.
- It is all on the web, so it is accessible anywhere with an internet connection, so you always have the latest version.
- It is easy to export into Word. Once you are ready to start writing properly, you don't have a blank piece of paper. The outline is already there.
- It is our favourite price: free.
- You can move sections round easily. I find this really useful, as I usually know what sections I want to write about, but the order takes more time to work out.
- You can keep track of the key features of characters & locations.
- You can see how frequently characters & places occur, & how those occurrences are distributed.
- If you dither over names, there is a tool to generate names for characters & places.

I've been using it for a few weeks, & I'm finding it really good. Once I forgot to click on save before I moved on, so watch out for that. I wish it was possible to indent and use bullet points, but that is a minor gripe. I've just got into the habit of writing notes in that sort of format.

Next time I'm editing a novel, I'm going to try keeping my notes in Hiveword.

How verbs can improve your writing

There are all sorts of strategies to improve your writing. Mostly they are easy to read about, but harder to implement. Often it pays to try one idea at a time.

This one concentrates on using verbs to [improve your writing](#).

Avoiding sentence fragments

Microsoft Word is very good at pointing out faults to us, but it isn't always clear what they are getting at. The idea of sentence fragments often has people cursing their screen.

A sentence fragment is missing one of the signs of a whole sentence:

- a subject,
- a verb,
- a complete thought.

This can make the logical progression of your writing unclear to the reader.

Incomplete sentences are a regular feature of creative writing and journalism, but it is not formal enough for academic writing, apart from tables, figures, & brief summaries.

Sentence fragments may be more difficult to identify when they consist of a dependent clause that has both a subject and a verb but cannot stand alone. For example:

- Demand for chocolate ice cream increased. Whereas sales of strawberry have dropped.
- Demand for chocolate ice cream increased. And the sales of strawberry have dropped.

Both examples have a complete sentence first, followed by a fragment. The second sentence makes no sense on its own. If you are asked to update the board briefly, saying the first sentence makes sense in each case. If you just read them the second sentence of the pair, they would think you were mad.

Both second sentences begin with conjunctions, so you can fix the problem by replacing the first full stop with a comma:

- Demand for chocolate ice cream increased, whereas sales of strawberry have dropped.
- Demand for chocolate ice cream increased, and sales of strawberry have dropped.

You now have 2 complete sentences, each made of 2 clauses.

The other way to fix the problem is to rewrite the second sentence, so that the link with the first sentence is completely clear:

- Demand for chocolate ice cream increased. In contrast, sales of strawberry have dropped.
- Demand for chocolate ice cream increased. Additionally, sales of strawberry have dropped.

Keeping a note book

Whether you are writing a book or marshalling ideas for a project, it is good to keep a note book of some sort. It doesn't really matter if it is an actual book or something on your phone, the idea is the same. Write down ideas before they are pushed out

of your mind by something else. The Open University have a couple of posts about how to make the best of your notebook:

- [The inspiration file.](#)
- [Research & observation.](#)

How do I choose a title?

Isn't it amazing how much effort it takes to choose a title? Occasionally inspiration hits straight away, but more often the problem looms larger as the project approaches completion.

The task is complicated by the many functions served by a title. Make sure you:

- Catch the attention of your audience, so they want to pick up your product.
- Particularly for non-fiction, think about any keywords your customers will use in their search.
- Make the product sound appealing. A good rhythm when you say your title aloud is important, but surprisingly hard. If the words you select jar against each other, sometimes shuffling them around improves the result. Look for a good pattern of syllables, so the pattern of stresses makes it flow.
- The title needs to be easy to say. Tongue twisters may seem clever, but once the novelty has worn off, you are stuck with it. The marketing campaign will suffer if interviewers trip over the title. If it is easy to say, it is easy to remember. That matters for something like a book, although a brochure or blog post might benefit from an eye catching title that won't necessarily have staying power.
- Avoid ambiguity, so it is clear what the content is about. Be careful you don't put your audience off, or attract people who won't be interested. Think what your audience expects to see.
- Include information about the brand, unique selling point (USP) or the gimmick you are using.
- Make it different enough from the competition to avoid confusion.
- Make it memorable enough to span the gap between hearing about it & buying it, or between finishing it & telling friends.
- Avoid cliché and jargon. You need to make people want to know more about what you have to say.

Be careful about the punctuation in your title. There are 2 aspects to this:

- The internet is full of examples of short phrases are changed completely by punctuation, for example:
 - Let's eat Grandma.
 - Let's eat, Grandma.

- Punctuation (and the & sign) cause problems in file names, searches etc.

As if that isn't enough to think about, remember how it will look on the cover. If the book or document will be marketed on the internet with a thumbnail, will the title be legible?

Subtitles are complex, covering:

- what it is about,
- who it is for, &
- containing key words.

This is a lengthy & random process. Jot down any ideas that occur to you, & the reactions you get to ideas. Good sources for titles have been Shakespeare, the Bible, poetry, and other famous quotations. These can help to gather in the right audience, and improve memorability, but the downside is the limited ability to stand apart, & the fact that others have used this route so often.

Writing a Grant Proposal

When you have a pet subject, it is tempting to focus on the benefits of your project. Grant applicants can usually talk easily about feasibility, novelty, and significant implications of their work.

All this is splendid stuff, but it probably isn't what the funders need to hear.

Remember your audience

Any piece of writing gets the best results if you remember the needs of your audience.

For a grant application, your audience is whoever will assess your proposal. They may not be experts in your specific field, so to help them, you should:

- Define all technical terms.
- Explain your methods.
- Provide thorough relevant background.
- Show that you have a clear aim, and the capability to meet that goal.
 - Highlight your ability
 - Include references to your past publications:
 - mentioning your unique relevant technical competence in a specific method,
 - describing alternative approaches that convey your ability to handle obstacles and unexpected outcomes, and even by using powerful verbs.

It is a difficult balance to strike, because you need to avoid oversimplification while keeping it clear.

Look professional

A professional proposal improves the chances of success. Remember the assessor will have many applications to read. Make sure you improve readability as much as you can, by using:

- headings to guide your reader through the argument.
- a legible font.
- space between paragraphs to make it easier on the eye.
- bullet points & lists to make it easier to take in the information.

Any abstract or summary may be the only section that reviewers read. If it doesn't pass the initial test, they may well not read any further. Make sure this section covers all the main points that will interest the assessor.

Use a check list

It is important to comply with all the guidelines you have been given. If you do not have a check list as part of your application pack, make yourself one & tick items off as you cover them. If the application is complex, particularly if it has taken a long time to write, or has been written by more than one person, it is useful to have 2 copies of the check list. Use one during the preparation of the application, and the other during final review. It is all too easy to take out a section that you think doesn't add anything, but actually it is needed to comply with the red tape.

Have a look at the organisation's website to pick up what matters to them. This is particularly important if you have been given very little guidance for the process.

Make sure you have included any buzzwords that matter to the organisation. It might be a good idea to include these on your check list.

Get feedback

Once you are happy with the application, it is always useful to get feedback from your colleagues. People who have been through similar processes may have valuable experience to share. Others will be able to give a more independent view of your case. They will have a less biased view of the scheme than you have, and will be able to point out weaknesses in the documentation.

Remember it is better for a colleague to spot a weakness, while there is still time to take action.

When you begin writing a piece

We assess people in the first few moments after meeting them. The same is true of writing. Whether it is a novel, an email or a sales brochure, you need to get attention, & make people want to know more.

If people don't like the beginning, they will stop reading. Few of us write the sort of material people have to read. The reality is that if you can't write the beginning, there is no point in writing at all, because no one will read it.

In a short piece, the first paragraph needs focus. In a book you may have more time, but who knows when the reader's attention will start to wander.

Your target is to do the following as soon as possible:

Aim	Non-fiction	Fiction
Get attention as soon as you can.	Explain what problem you will solve.	Get into the action straight away.
Make promises, then keep them later.	Check the body of the piece covers what was promised. Don't cry wolf.	Who is the main character? Lay the ground conflict. Establish time & place.
Don't steal your own thunder.	If you reveal the answer quickly, make it clear that readers need to keep reading because it is more complex.	Don't hint at the happy ever after ending.
Make sure the end ties in with the beginning.	Have you covered the ground you promised, & reached a useful conclusion?	Have you tied up all the loose ends in the plot?

Fiction authors sometimes get bogged down in the back story. They start by explaining how the characters got to the beginning of the story, forgetting that the **back** story should remain in the **background**.

Non-fiction writers often find this tendency harder to spot. It is often easier to beat the blank page by gearing yourself up with a bland opening sentence. There is no harm in that, as long as you cut it once you are in the swing of it & the words are flowing. Look out for anything that translates to "Today I am going to tell you about..." or "I am writing this..."

If you haven't written anything, no one else will be reading it.

Set out your stall straight away, and hint at what is to come.

Try to study opening sentences & analyse which appeal to you. Work out why that is, & then apply those ideas when you write.

Getting attention on the web

A website needs to get attention & engage readers. People come up with all sorts of ways to be different & get noticed. Unfortunately, some of these clever, eye catching ideas get in your audience's way, and are counter productive.

Read more about how [branding puts people off](#).

Plain English and productivity

Here is some good advice about how [simple language](#) & clear communication helps you to get more done.

Planning your research

My Dad used to say that time spent in reconnaissance is never wasted. Somehow, the reconnaissance Mum & I wanted to do round the shops never counted.

Whatever you are writing, research is an important part of the process. Your research time will give you the most value if you are organised & logical about it. Here are 2 posts to help:

- Why you should keep the writer's equivalent of a [sketchbook](#).
- How to get the [best out of your research](#).

Do you know when to stop?

We all struggle with a piece of writing.

Sometimes the answer is to try harder, knuckle down & sort it out. Other times it is best to give up & do something more constructive.

So how do you recognise the difference? Try these tips from [The Procrastewriter](#).

Want to avoid overwriting?

Find out how to [avoid overwriting](#) here.

Exploring a topic

So you have thought of a subject. Now you need an angle. Or perhaps you have an angle, but you need to say more.

It has been said that there are only a few story lines, and for centuries writers have been looking for new angles on the same stories. The same is true of topics. They all fall under just a few headings.

To make sure you have thought of all aspects worthy of comment, remember *Phraseems*, standing for:

- **P**olitical
- **H**istorical
- **R**eligious
- **A**rtistic/aesthetic/literary
- **S**ocial
- **E**conomic
- **E**cological/environmental
- **M**oral/ethical
- **S**cientific/technological

Whatever your topic is, there will be something to say under at least a couple of these headings.