

Writing Documentation

Effective writing is a key communication medium¹ for all aspects of project management ranging from formal contract documents, through meeting minutes and instructions to quick emails. There are several universal rules for effective business writing:

Focus the document:

One document one purpose - focus purely on the topic.

- Define your aim. Know precisely why you are writing the document and what you expect to achieve in the mind of the reader.
- Define your audience and write for them, you are writing for an objective, keep this reason firmly in mind. Set the 'tone' of the document to match the prior knowledge, attitude and preferences of the audience.
- Plan the content, list your sub-topics and stick to them. If you need to go off topic, then put the content in an Appendix or another document and reference it.

Make it flow:

Start with an introduction or executive summary that overviews the topic, tells the reader what they are going to learn and outlines the structure of the document. Then write the main body of the document and end with a conclusion or action list/recommended actions.

Write your document so that each section flows from one sub-topic to the next. This way, the user never has to pause to work out where they are. So before you finish each section, introduce the next section.

Have a clear structure:

Think carefully about your Table of Contents, it should be simple and easy to understand. Your readers need to be able to scan the Table of Contents to get a quick feel for what your document contains.

Write clearly:

- Keep it simple!
- Use short sentences and paragraphs
- Avoid surplus content, clutter and jargon and write in simple, plain terms that everyone understands – all acronyms need to be explained
- Use bulleted lists to highlight points
- Use tables to make data easier to read they are easily scanned
- Insert diagrams to explain difficult topics
- Avoid gender-specific language and excessive abbreviations.
- Minimise the use of outlining and indents (where required try to avoid more than 3 levels of outline and used standard styles for the headings and contents
- Make appropriate (limited) use of bolding, italics and underlining²
- Check your spelling (spell checkers are not enough: to, two and tow are all correct spellings but change the meaning of a sentence).

¹ For more on communication theory see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1066_Communication_Theory.pdf

² For more on effective page layout see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1065_Page_Layout.pdf

Understand and use punctuation wisely:

Quotation marks mean someone is “talking” they are used for recording the words spoken by a person and occasionally for identifying citations and titles. Single inverted commas are only used for ‘unusual’ uses of a word. Highlighting is best achieved by italicising or bolding text.

English and American punctuation rules are different – Australia tends to use UK punctuation.

- See more on UK rules at: <http://www.examples-help.org.uk/punctuation/index.htm>
- See more on USA rules at: <http://www.englishclub.com/writing/punctuation.htm>

Allow adequate time:

Don’t write in a hurry. Every document benefits from review and revision. Allow as long as possible between the first draft and the first review, ideally 2 or 3 days but at least overnight. Important documents benefit from 2 or 3 revisions with a space of several hours between each. A ‘second pair of eyes’ helps, you will be amazed at how many things a good proof reader finds after you have fully revised and edited the text.

Conclusion:

Include just the right amount of information! Keep the document short and focused, but informative and helpful. **KISS** - keep it sweet and simple.