

# WRITING

## for Instructional Design

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# Writing For Instructional Design

by **Connie Malamed**

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# INTRODUCTION

Writing is a wonderful and complicated process. Although it can be a powerful and inspiring experience, writing can also be an exercise in frustration.

Instructional designers write for a myriad of purposes, often with no training for specific types of writing. If you need help with writing for work and aren't sure where to turn, this brief guide is for you. It covers several types of writing commonly practiced by instructional designers: technical writing, scripting for audio and video, and persuasive writing. I hope to provide you with some of the best practices and guidelines in these four types of writing.

Best wishes,  
*Connie Malamed*

*P.S. If you have feedback, suggestions or questions regarding this guide, you can reach me on Twitter: [@elearningcoach](https://twitter.com/elearningcoach) or Facebook: [facebook.com/elearningcoach](https://facebook.com/elearningcoach). You can also send a message through the [Contact Form](#) at [theelearningcoach.com](http://theelearningcoach.com).*

# ARE YOU SKIPPING THIS KEY PROCESS?

## A FIVE-STEP WRITING PLAN

Writing is one of the most effective forms of communication and is one of the most important skills an instructional designer can develop. You can describe, inform, explain, persuade, and entertain your audiences through writing.

From this point on, think of yourself as a professional writer. Your goal is to continually improve your competence in this craft. And one way to quickly improve your writing is to follow a well-organized writing process.

In this section, we will look at a writing strategy that consists of these five steps:

1. Prepare
2. Research extensively
3. Develop an outline
4. Write your draft (and revise)
5. Proofread and finalize

## 1. Prepare

Before you dive directly into writing, spend your time in the prewriting activities of preparation and research.

**Know your purpose and goal.** Clearly identify the purpose and goal of your writing. This will save you from straying down unnecessary paths.

What do learners need to know and do? Do they need an explanation, or do they need to be persuaded? This affects the tone and style of your writing.

Consider if there are more subtle goals your writing can fulfill. For example, in a new hire orientation course, are you also trying to convince new employees they made a great decision?

**Know the target audience.** Both instructional designers and writers need to know the characteristics of the people who will be reading, watching, or listening to their writing.

Identify the age range, gender, education level and interests of your target population.

Determine the context in which they will view your writing. Will it be an online course or a printed job aid?

Is the audience motivated? Will this course solve a problem? How do they feel about the content? Knowing the answers to these questions will help you meet your audience where they live.

**Identify the scope.** Determine the scope of your project by understanding the goals and objectives of the course or product. Try to estimate how much writing is involved. You don't want to do more planning and writing than is necessary, so define the limits of your project.

## 2. Research extensively

To explain a subject, you must understand it. This seems obvious until you realize that instructional designers, in the role of writers, are often required to create content about unfamiliar subjects. You'll want to know the subject well enough to meet the goals of the project.

In addition to reviewing content provided by the course sponsor, consider interviewing experts and skimming books, journal articles and reputable sources online. You'll be surprised at how research can add depth to your writing.

Even if you know the subject well, using other sources can add insight and perspective to your work.

## 3. Develop an outline

An outline saves time because it develops a logical structure. Without it, your writing may lack the organization that learners need. This one step is universally recommended by nonfiction writers.

When you take the time to create an outline, you're able to easily consider (and reconsider) the best way to present information to your audience.

An alternative to the outline is to place all the topics on sticky notes on a wall. Start by arranging them into topics and subtopics. Then rearrange the sticky notes until you're satisfied. Use this structure to create an outline, or work straight from your sticky notes.

## 4. Write your draft (and revise)

With goals and research in hand, you are finally ready to write. Go with the flow at first without thinking too much about errors and mistakes.

Put down all your ideas as they come. This is the way to find your voice.

Aim for a logical flow, and use powerful words. Let your writing transition smoothly from sentence to sentence. You won't achieve all of this in your first attempt, but it's good to keep in mind.

*"If you were playing the violin, you wouldn't expect to pick it up and go to Carnegie Hall within six months."*

*Karl Iglesias, 101 Habits of Highly Successful Screenwriters*

Many writers use some type of cue or notation that allows them to continue writing without breaking the flow, even after a problem arises.

For example, suppose you don't want to stop your stream of thought even though you discover a content gap in your outline. Simply add words in all caps as a reminder to return and fix the gap, such as, [INSERT MORE CONTENT HERE]. Think up your own ways to stay in the flow.

Writing is an iterative process. After your first draft, you'll need to run through it several times to revise. In particular, focus on clarity and on eliminating extraneous words. The process of rewriting and revising could go on forever. Be thankful that there are deadlines.



## 5. Proofread and Finalize

Bring your internal editor back to action after you finish writing. Spelling and grammar checkers are not enough. Read line by line to carefully examine every aspect of your writing—from clarity to punctuation to formatting.

Rewrite poorly structured sentences; fix words that are not used appropriately and turn passive sentences into the active voice. When you see specific problem areas in your writing, work systematically to correct them.

Use an experienced editor whenever you can. It's impossible to proof and correct your own work as well as a professional editor. If no editor is available, request a second reading from a skilled writer in your workplace. It's a big risk to release writing that has not been reviewed by another set of eyes.



## Further Reading

[Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life](#) by Anne Lamott. This is a funny and moving book that will inspire you to write. My personal favorite.

[Easy Writer](#) by Andrea A. Lunsford. Straightforward writing book written for college students, applicable to the workplace.

[The Grammar Bible](#) by Strumpf and Douglas. An excellent reference on grammar, even though it's from 2004.

[Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing](#) by Mignon Fogarty. An unstuffy guide to improving both your grammar and your writing.

# WORKING WITH DRY CONTENT

## TECHNICAL WRITING

One of the most difficult aspects of the instructional designer's job is to take a dull topic and find ways to make it engaging. We are often tasked with writing instructions for using technical products or for following procedures. This is referred to as technical writing.

We use technical writing for subjects as diverse as science and medicine; hardware and software; and finance and business.

Here are five tips for making your technical writing clear and effective.

### 1. Understand their skills

Technical topics can be complex, so it's particularly important to identify the specific knowledge and skills of your target audience prior to writing. This will help you determine the technical depth you can present to your audience.

*“Often the problem is not getting the information, but identifying what information is relevant.”*

Pringle and O'Keefe, Technical Writing 101

## 2. Use a cascade of subtopics

Organize your content into multiple sections, and separate these into as many subtopics as needed. Use a logical structure. Technical subjects require a tight organization that learners can use as a framework for understanding.

Make your organizational approach clear with breadcrumbs or a similar technique. Headings can be color coded so learners are always oriented to where they are in the cascade.

## 3. Write in the present tense

Writing in the present tense serves to clarify an idea, and it brings immediacy to a technical explanation. In an effort to be accurate, technical writers have a tendency to write in the future tense.

For example, a software tutorial might state, “After you log in to your account, a new page *will display.*” Yet writing it in the present tense makes the sentence simpler: “After you log in to your account, a new page *displays.*” It’s a subtle difference, but worth noting.

## 4. Remind learners of the purpose

It’s easy for learners to get lost in the technical details. Periodically remind them of the final goal to keep them motivated. Do this in a way that flows with the instruction.

This will help learners stay focused on the big picture. In addition, be sure that the audience understands the benefit of the instruction.

## 5. Be concise

Explaining complex subjects can breed wordiness. It's not easy to get a point across in a minimal number of words. That's the challenge of technical writing.

Check that your sentences are as succinct as possible. Avoid redundancy and unnecessary tangents.

Replace long or complex words with simple alternatives. For example, replace the word "endeavor" with "try" and "enquire" with "ask."



## Further Reading

Many tech writing books are "document" oriented. You have to adapt their guidelines to your media.

[Developing Quality Technical Information](#) by Hargis, et al. Focuses on characteristics of quality writing.

[The Handbook of Technical Writing](#) by Alred, Brusaw & Oliu. A serious reference for technical and general writing.

[Technical Writing Process](#) by Kieran Morgan. A friendly five-step writing plan for technical writing.

# WRITING FOR THE EARS NOT THE EYES

## WRITING AUDIO SCRIPTS

Instructional designers frequently write audio scripts for the narration of multimedia courses. Writing for the ear is quite different than writing for the eyes, so be prepared.

Unlike readers, listeners usually don't stop and replay something again. Because of this, it's vital to clarify your ideas through short and simple sentences.

*“A script should be invisible. When delivered, it shouldn't sound like a script.”*

CDC Podcast Scriptwriting Guide

Writing for listeners is more casual than writing for readers. You can often use a conversational tone.

As you read the following tips, keep in mind that the human voice provides a wonderful opportunity to connect with your audience.

### **1. Write like you speak**

Unless you're writing for a particularly formal purpose, write your audio script just as you would speak. People speak in short sentences using everyday words and contractions. Keep this in mind to avoid sounding overly academic or stiff.

## 2. Why brevity is important

When instruction is audio-based, it's important to think through how much listeners can process at once.

If you cram too much information into a short time frame, your audience may become overloaded, and some information will be lost. Present small bits of information whenever possible, and get to the point quickly.

*“The period is one of the reader’s (and writer’s) best friends.”*

Paula LaRocque, *The Book on Writing: The Ultimate Guide to Writing Well*

## 3. Repeat key points

When you're presenting a key or complex point, find ways to repeat it. One way is to repeat the same words with flair for emphasis.

For example, in a course on communication, the script might read, “Experts say that human communication consists of ninety-three percent body language and non-verbal cues. You heard that right. *Ninety-three percent* of our communication comes from body language and non-verbal cues!”

Or, repeat the point using new wording. It often helps a learner to get the message when it's presented in a variety of ways. Wording that is confusing to one learner might be perfect for another.

## 4. Use “connection” words

Use words and phrases that will build a connection between the narrator and the audience. Referring to audience members as “our,” “us,” and “we” implies that you’re both on the same team.

You can also build connection by using the familiar work vocabulary of your audience members. That’s one type of information you can collect during the prewriting phase of research.

## 5. Notate silence

In the world of multimedia eLearning, there are two important reasons why you may need a brief pause. One is to give learners a moment to process information.

The other is to match the audio with actions on the screen. For example, you may need a second to display text or to build a graphic.

Indicate these breaks with an ellipsis (...) in your script and tell the narrator to wait “one beat.”

## 6. Sentence length

If you use only one idea in each sentence, it will make your writing job easier. The recommended length of a sentence for an audio script is around 25 words. But that’s just a recommendation, so don’t be too rigid.

Mix up short sentences with those that are slightly longer. If you must use a longer sentence, keep in mind that the narrator will need to take a breath at some point, so you must allow for an appropriate pause.

## 7. Read scripts aloud

Find a private place (so people won't think you're weird) to read the script aloud. Take the place of the narrator and read it as he or she would.

You'll most likely find awkward phrasing, word combinations that are difficult to pronounce, and sentences that don't allow the narrator to take a breath.

Revise these sore spots, and read aloud again. Repeat this process until your script can be read smoothly.



## Further Reading

[The Book On Writing: The Ultimate Guide to Writing Well](#) by Paula LaRocque. Although this book is not focused on audio scripts, it covers writing best practices, guidelines and storytelling.

[Writing for Multimedia and the Web](#) by Timothy Garrand. This book focuses on writing for interactive media. Some applies to audio scripts.



# LIGHTS, CAMERA, NOW LEARN!

## WRITING VIDEO SCRIPTS

In the world of learning, a video format is effective for showing how something works or is assembled, for modeling behaviors, and for telling stories. Any time motion is required, video (or animation) is often the best approach.

Depending on your target audience, some people find learning from video easier than listening or reading.

When you have approved content in hand, you can begin to conceptualize how a video might play out. The number one rule for video scriptwriting is to think visually.

### **1. Write a creative treatment**

The treatment describes your proposed approach to a video. It's a way to make your ideas concrete and to communicate a blueprint to team members and clients or sponsors. Write the creative treatment prior to writing the script.

In the treatment document, start with the purpose of the video, the audience, estimated length of the video, and how it will be used. Then write your description and the style and theme you're proposing.

Some script writers create a treatment in outline form, describing what will be seen and heard in each scene of the video. You can also add the key instructional points to the outline.

## 2. Use a two-column format

Video scripts typically use a two-column format. Use one column for the audio portion and the other for the video.

Include dialogue, narration, music and sound effects in the audio column. Include all visuals, photographs, actions, existing footage, on-screen text, and scene direction in the video column.

## 3. The three-part structure

Audiences are comfortable with the structure of movies, stories, and plays. If you stay with the familiar structure of opening, middle (presentation), and closing (resolution), your learners won't be distracted by trying to figure out what is going on.

**Opening.** To grab interest and attention from the start, make your opening powerful. Consider bold statements, dramatic conflict, intrigue, or high-impact visuals. Then quickly explain what the video is about.

**Presentation.** The presentation doesn't need to be overtly didactic. Rather, you can weave key points into a theme, a story, a narrative, or another compelling technique that will keep the audience involved.

**Closing.** The final part of the structure is the resolution. It could entail solving a problem, fixing a conflict, or telling the audience how to take action. If you need to review instructional points at the end, try to do it in the context of the video's theme or storyline.

## 4. Show don't tell

Video is a highly visual medium. Throughout the writing process, repeat this mantra: “Show don't tell.”

Your audience will be watching, not reading. The video director should be able to visualize the images from reading your script.

Think about visual detail. Appeal to the senses by expressing how things look, feel, smell, and taste. Be visually precise so viewers get the message that you want to communicate.

## 5. Make visuals concrete

Audiences are more likely to remember visuals than a spoken message. Use imagery that stands on its own. Make visuals concrete and specific.

Imagine an anti-smoking video that describes what can happen to the lungs from years of smoking. Show the gruesome x-ray and the patient wheezing rather than the standard pack of cigarettes or a group of people in a smoking lounge. The former specifically shows what's being discussed. The latter is too general.

“Naturally sticky ideas are stuffed full of concrete words and images.”

*Chip and Dan Heath, Made to Stick*

## 6. Leverage camera shots

Hollywood movies use varied shots to evoke emotion and create a mood. You too can use the visual language of the camera to express your message by adding shots to your script.

Conventional abbreviations that indicate the position of the camera are listed next.

- CU: Close-up
- MS: Medium Shot
- LS: Long Shot
- OS: Off-screen
- Two-shot: Two characters in one shot
- Pan: Sweeping movement of the camera across a scene
- Zoom: Camera moves in or out from subject

## 7. Add B-roll

You can go beyond the talking head or typical interview video by using B-roll at key points in the script. This is alternate footage cut into the main shot that corresponds to the audio track.

For example, during an interview about new offices that were just completed, the video could cut to footage showing a tour of the building. Supplementary footage is a good way to add appeal and interest to your video.



### Further Reading and Listening

[Scriptwriting for High-Impact Videos](#) by John Morley. Includes topics relevant to our writing, but also includes business of scriptwriting.

[Writing for Visual Media](#) by Anthony Friedman. Has chapters on corporate communication, nonfiction and interactive media.

[How to Stop Making Boring Videos \(podcast\)](#)

# ARGUE, CONVINCING AND CONQUER

## PERSUASIVE WRITING

Any time you're writing to prove a point or change an opinion, you're engaged in persuasive writing. Instructional designers use persuasive writing to change attitudes, thinking patterns, and behaviors for a variety of purposes.

Perhaps you've been tasked to convince employees to adopt a healthier lifestyle. Or, you could be writing a report explaining why social media should be supported in your workplace (good luck!).

Maybe you are writing a proposal to bring in more business. All of these tasks involve writing to persuade.

Whatever your purpose, persuasive writing is both an art and a science. You need to appeal to your audience, demonstrate substantial evidence, and have a well-thought out argument. This requires clear insights into your topic and the target population.

Here are five tips for improving your persuasive writing skills.

**“To be persuasive, a case must be understandable, attractive and credible.”**

*Patrick Forsyth, Effective Business Writing*

## 1. Research brings credibility

While research is important to all writing, persuasive writing demands it. You need to support your opinion with facts, statistics, examples and quotes.

During the research phase, investigate all sides of the topic. When possible, speak with people who don't share your opinion. Attempt to understand their reasoning and their feelings. This will let you know how some audience members will respond to your persuasive approach.

It's important to use objective facts from an outside source to back up your claim. Cite the source of facts and statistics you present. This brings more credibility to your writing.

Think of your own reaction to a persuasive article. You'll be more likely to believe a claim if there are references and research to back it up.

## 2. Transitions are key

Transitions are particularly important in persuasive writing because these words and phrases help to clarify your points. They serve as cues for understanding when you are continuing on with an idea and when you are contrasting a point.

Effective words for connecting ideas include: *another reason, additionally, in the same way, and furthermore.*

Effective phrases for contrasting two points include: *on the other hand, having said that, in contrast, and although.*

Proper transitions can help you persuade with clarity.

### 3. Address resistance

Persuasive writing is a delicate task. When successful, it addresses the opposing viewpoint with skill. This is known as a two-sided message. An effective two-sided message acknowledges and adeptly refutes the opposing opinion.

But opposition to your message is not always based on a difference in opinion. It can also come from resistance to change or lack of interest to your cause.

By understanding your audience's objections and resistance, you can prepare to address the root of it through the knowledge you've gained from research.

### 4. State an explicit claim

Use an explicit conclusion or claim in persuasive writing. If you're not explicit, learners may come away with the wrong idea.

Although it's intuitive to state a conclusion after building a persuasive argument, you might want to start with the claim.

For example, if your audience is not interested in the topic or is unmotivated to change, you may want to start with an explicit conclusion. Then at least the audience hears the message before tuning out.

## 5. Close with an action prompt

The result of successful persuasive writing is often a noticeable change in some behavior. If this is your objective, then close your piece with an action that the audience member should take.

Use compelling language when prompting an action. Make it decisive, powerful and clear. For example, this prompt has no authority:

“If you’re thinking about signing up for the ‘Stop Smoking Now’ class, come visit and see if you’d like to join.”

But this version makes it harder to say no:

“Sign up for ‘Stop Smoking Now’ today. Your loved ones will be thrilled to know you’re serious about quitting.”



## Further Reading

[A Rulebook for Arguments](#) by Anthony Weston. Guidelines for how to build a solid argument.

[Point Made: How to Write Like the Nation’s Top Advocates](#) by Ross Guberman. Although this book is for legal profession, it has useful ideas.

[They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Persuasive Writing](#) by Graff and Birkenstein. Interesting perspective on persuasive writing.



# CLOSING

## THIS IS NOT THE END

I hope this is just the beginning of your writing quest and that you continue to practice and improve. Read writing blogs, writing books and consider taking a workshop or course. Effective writing is an essential skill for most careers.

### CONTACT INFO

Don't go away forever. We were just getting to know each other. Here's where you can find me:

- Website: [thelearningcoach.com](http://thelearningcoach.com) (sign up for my monthly newsletter with articles, resources and freebies)
- Twitter: [@elearningcoach](https://twitter.com/elearningcoach)
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I'm an author, speaker and consultant in the fields of online learning and visual communication. I publish [The eLearning Coach](#) website, filled with articles, reviews, resources and a podcast.

I've written two books about visual design:

- *[Visual Design Solutions: Principles and Creative Inspiration for Learning Professionals](#)*
- *[Visual Language For Designers: Principles for Creating Graphics That People Understand](#)*.

I also created an app and a free course:

- [Instructional Design Guru](#) defines more than 470 relevant terms (with tips) that instructional designers should know.
- [Breaking Into Instructional Design](#) is a 12-lesson email course about a career in ID.