

Using these tips will improve your articles, nonfiction books, e-books, proposals, queries—even fiction. (This somewhat-random list came from 20 years of planning, authoring, testing, editing, and producing technical documentation and nontechnical articles and books.) Have fun!

Note: Sometimes I break my own rules.

Planning

1. Technical writer's formula: over the life of a project, 1 page = 1 day.
2. The jobs you think will take the most time take the least.
3. The jobs you think will take the least time take the most.
4. Write a project plan before you begin (which can become your proposal or query). Include:
 - Title
 - One-sentence description
 - Your audience
 - Scope of the project (what it is and isn't)
 - One-paragraph description of contents
 - Annotated outline
 - Resources (who will need to help you with the project—for example, interview subjects, graphic artists, software applications)
 - Project schedule, including major milestones (dates and deliverables)
 - How the project will be delivered (in what medium)
 - Dependencies and expectations

Process

5. When you begin working every day, make a copy of yesterday's work, create a new file with the current date. (Easy to go back to earlier versions if necessary.)
6. Back up your files every day—to an off site server, a CD, floppy disk, or email to yourself or a friend.
7. If you don't know something at the time, write [??] or [tk] (for "to come").

8. In final draft search for [] to find and then fill in the missing information.
9. Stay on schedule.
10. Do your very best work within your deadline.
11. If you need an extension, ask as soon as you know.
12. Be gracious to everyone, even if they aren't to you.
13. Work with your editor, copyeditor, proofreader, illustrator, and production specialist as a team. They're the experts in their areas, just as you are in yours.
14. Hand in a polished copy. You'll gain a (good) reputation for that. Don't expect your editor to fix sloppiness.

Research

15. When in doubt, look it up—don't fake facts.
16. Take research and bibliographical notes as you go. Use index cards or a database program.
17. Look up words you're unsure about. Better yet, use a simpler word.
18. If you don't understand something when talking with experts, ask them to start at the very beginning. Be humble. Most people are happy to explain complex concepts to ensure correct information.
19. Take lots of notes; use a voice recorder, if necessary.
20. If you still don't understand a concept, keep asking the same question.
21. Thank your interviewees and experts.
22. Don't rely solely on the Internet for facts; it contains a lot of misinformation. Verify with at least three sources.

Organization

23. Write in "chunks" of information, set off by hierarchical headings. This is how we absorb, process, and remember information.

24. Present information in logical order—what do readers need to know first, second, third, and so on?
25. For how-to: 1st-level head = conceptual info (“about”);
2nd-level head = instructions and directions (gerund verbs);
3rd-level head = examples, troubleshooting, “gotchas,” and so on.
26. Make headings descriptive, so readers know what the content is as they scan.
27. Put warnings, notes, and tips in separate paragraphs where readers need them most. Set them off with graphics (icons) or a different text style (such as bold).
28. Put warnings, notes, and tips in that order, if they appear together.
29. Write steps first (they’re straightforward), then fill conceptual and introductory information around them.
30. Write introductions last.
31. If you tell readers what you’re going to tell them, be sure to tell them in the order you told them you’d tell them. (Is that clear?)
32. Put several bits of extraneous information in a bulleted “Notes” list.
33. Put large pieces of extraneous information in appendixes.
34. Don’t create more appendixes than you have chapters.
35. Organize books in a logical order or progression. For example:
Preface
1. Introducing
2. Overview
3. Setting Up
4. Doing A
5. Doing B
6. Doing C
7. Troubleshooting/Solving Problems
A. Appendixes
Glossary
Bibliography
Index

Lists

36. Put similar, non-sequential info into bulleted lists (*unordered* list).
37. Write ordered lists with parallel structure.
38. Put sequential information into numbered steps (*ordered* list).
39. In general, preface lists with an introductory sentence or phrase, often ending with a colon (:).
40. An unordered list can be numbered even if it’s not sequential, when prefaced by, for example: *There are three ways to reinvent the wheel:* .
41. If you say “There are three ways,” be sure you give three.
42. In steps, make each step one logical action, including what readers do (action) and what happens (result or consequence).
43. Place results of an action in a separate paragraph just below the numbered step.
44. General rule: Have no more than 7 steps in each task.
45. If a task takes more than 7 steps, break it into more tasks.
46. You can put bulleted lists in steps.

Tables

47. Condense 3 or more similar pieces of information into a table.
48. If you have fewer than 3, use a list.
49. Write table content with parallel structure.
50. Make table headings reader friendly and task oriented:
To Reduce Fat Do This
51. Order table rows alphabetically (by the contents of the first column, first row), unless there’s another logical order (such as sequential actions).
52. You can insert a table within steps, and put steps in a table.

Art

53. Use art to enhance, explain, or replace text.
54. Place art where readers will need it most.
55. Use *conceptual* art to show a process.
56. Use a *drawing* to emphasize or simplify something.
57. Use a *photograph* to show something exactly.
58. Use *callouts* in an illustration to describe or explain a portion of the it.
59. Use a *caption* to describe the illustration overall.
60. Use icons for visual appeal or emphasis, but don't overdo them.

Indexing

61. Plan an index's format and style before you begin.
62. Choose an indexing style and stick to it.
63. When planning, think about what information readers will want to look up that they can't see in the TOC.
64. Index as you work, instead of when you've finished the ms. Use a notebook, index cards, your word processor's indexing tool, or a separate software application.
65. Index the content, not heading titles (the TOC provides that information).
66. Index terms that are unique to your project.
67. Think about other ways your readers describe a term. Index that term, and add "See <X>"
68. Index nouns and uncommon verbs only; don't index "seeing, saving, viewing, cooking," and so on.

Editing

69. The more complicated and roundabout your writing is, the less you understand the material.
70. The cleaner and simpler your writing is, the better you understand the material.

71. Write "transparently" so that your words don't call attention to themselves.
72. Learn proofreaders' marks.
73. For instructions or directions, have a friend "keystroke" (test) the steps to make sure they're correct. Find someone at same skill level of your readers.
74. Check your spelling. If you're unsure, having someone else proofread your ms. Don't rely on spell-checking software.
75. Do 3 edits: (1) for organization and flow; (2) for completeness; (3) for proofreading.
76. Put the writing aside for a day or two, and then look at it again before final editing.
77. Proofread and polish until you've picked it clean.
78. Learn grammar and punctuation rules.
79. Use a standard style guide or create your own, then use it consistently.
80. Use the *MLA Handbook* for footnotes and bibliographies.
81. Use the *Chicago Manual of Style*, *AP Style*, and publisher's house style guide.

Style

82. Write conversationally.
83. It's okay to end a sentence with a preposition.
84. Be familiar with commonly misused terms (for example, ensure and insure).
85. Write in short sentences. Keep sentences to ten words.
86. Write in short paragraphs.
87. Delete all unnecessary words.
88. Replace complicated words with simple ones.
89. Fulfill your reader's needs, instead of writing about the topic.
90. Display white space.
91. Don't use jargon unless you know your audience understands the term.

92. The first time you use a new term or concept, place it in italics, followed by a brief definition in parentheses. Then use the term consistently. (Don't use a different word for the same thing.)
93. Don't duplicate information. If readers see the same thing twice, they wonder what's different—which sets up doubt, confusion, and paranoia. Use cross-references instead.
94. Use your word-processing application's cross-referencing tool, which automatically inserts the correct page number and style.
95. Use English words instead of Latin. For example, use “for example” instead of “e.g.”; “and so on” instead of “etc.”; “by” or “through” instead of “via.”
96. Use positive phrasing instead of negative. Instead of telling readers what not to do, tell them what to do.
97. Say it simply. For example, instead of “by virtue of the fact that,” say “because.”
98. In instructions, use the present tense (not past or future). Imagine that your are readers doing it right now.
99. To keep text gender neutral, use plural form of pronouns.
100. Use acronyms sparingly.
101. The first time you use an acronym, write out the full term, followed immediately by the acronym in parentheses. Then use only the acronym.
102. Include acronyms in a glossary of unique terms.
103. Spell out numbers from one to ten; then use digits. (There are always exceptions.)
104. Use the right voice for your readers and the publication.
105. One space after final punctuation is standard.
106. Write in active—not passive—voice; use active sentence construction.
107. Write to “you” whenever possible.
108. If you're writing to an international audience, use international examples. Avoid examples about baseball, hot dogs, Christmas during winter (half the world celebrates Christmas in summer), and so on. Use names from different languages and countries. Remember, your readers are male, female, and from hundreds of ethnic, family, and economic backgrounds.
109. For international audiences, include metric measurements.
110. Another reason to write precisely and concisely: Text translated into some languages (such as German and Japanese) expands by 20 percent, which increases production costs.
111. Avoid using exclamation points!

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