Forms of informative writing

**Short pieces of writing such as:**
- Labels
- Captions
- Memos
- Letters
- Glossaries
- Instructions
- Database texts
- Curriculum vitae
- Lists, listings and catalogues
- Formal letters, faxes and email
- Diaries and logs to be read by others
- Product descriptions and specifications
- Explanatory notes on technical drawings

**Documents such as:**
- All types of reports:
  - Accident reports
  - Administrative reports
  - Business reports
  - Engineering reports
  - Government reports
  - Laboratory reports
  - Medical reports
  - Reports of public inquiries
- Public charters
- Legal contracts and terms of agreements
- Insurance and pensions policy schedules
- Proposals, prospectuses, business plans, bid documents (the informative parts)
- Educational scripts, including for video or multi-media projects
- Academic dissertations, theses and research papers

**Books such as:**
- Textbooks and coursebooks
- Manuals, handbooks and guides
- Encyclopaedias, gazetteers and dictionaries
- In fact, probably most books classified as non-fiction by booksellers and librarians

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Common faults in informative writing

Information written for the writer, not the reader
Information with no objective in mind
Poorly organised information
Poorly signposted information
Unnecessary information
Missing information
Incorrect information
Misleading information
Type(s) too small
Too much information on each page
Mistakes in spelling, grammar and punctuation
If your target readership is diverse

It's difficult to hold an image of a diverse readership but there are ways to cope with this. Usually the best way is to write different parts of your document or book for the different parts of your readership, and at the beginning explain what you've done. In particular, tell the separate readerships to avoid the parts not intended for them.

If for some reason you can't do this (for example, because it's not appropriate) other techniques are to write for the part of the target readership that's...

- in the majority
- most likely to benefit (that is to say, needs it most)
- most likely to buy (wants it most)
- most likely to read (hopefully the same)
- most likely to lead you to produce a document or book that's the best compromise for the whole readership.

Which of these tactics has been adopted to cope with the diverse readership of this book?
Target readership influences not only scope and content in planning, but also style of language in writing. In planning this book, the perceived scope and content for students was more or less compatible with that for professionals. But it's probably impossible to write a whole book in a style that's right for both young students and older professionals. For this book the thinking was that professional people would find a book styled for students more rewarding than vice versa. That's why this book is targeted at students but only expects to attract professional people. So in part, the answer to the question is that the book was written for the part of the target readership that would lead to the best result for the whole readership.

Finally

Even when you've firmly identified your target readership, beware, because as soon as you start writing it's still always easier to write for yourself.

Practical Notes

1. "Your aim is communication..."
   Without instruction most people start writing for themselves rather than for their readers. Most of us are self-centred in this way. But writing informatively for yourself makes sense for only a few things: a private diary, a record of a lecture, a meeting at work — all to help your own recall of events. Even a business diary should be written with a secretary in mind. In other words, in nearly all informative writing other than these few examples, your aim is communication.

2. "...and the effectiveness of a communication is measured by the quality of its reception..." It's the reading that counts. If it's not read, or if it's read without being taken in, then usually it will have been a waste of time writing it — unless it carries legal force like a tax form or a contract.

3. "...not by the quality of its transmission": Fine words will be ineffective if your readers haven't the background or education to understand them.

4. The need-to-know principle:
   Why are you reading this book? Almost certainly it's because you've decided you need to improve your writing skills, or because someone has decided for you. In other words, switching to your point of view as the writer:
   Initially, people will choose your work on the basis of their need to know.

This is why on the leading page of this chapter the third step asks: "Do they need to know it?" This is a formulation of the need-to-know principle, which is central to identifying your target readership and central to planning effective informative writing.

Also, notice that it's not me the writer who's doing the choosing:
   You can identify and target readers but you can't choose them; they choose you.

5. The thinking behind the method: Writing with particular readers in mind will improve the reception of your message, but even better is writing with the right readers in mind. The right readers are the ones who need to know what you have to say. They'll come to you. They'll choose either to buy your work or, if they're given it, they'll choose to read with attention and to the end.

Writing for the readers you should be writing for, rather than for the ones that initially perhaps you want to write for, implies a check of some sort.

Hence:
   Decide which readers you want to write for.
   Check that they're the ones you should be writing for and, if they're not, deciding who is.
   Characterise these readers in detail.

6. Even when you've firmly identified your target readership, beware, because as soon as you start writing it's still always easier to write for yourself.

But if you stray, Chapter 3 should pull you back on track.
Reflective Notes

7. What's the difference between a readership and an audience? A readership reads and an audience listens.

8. Why identify readership before objective? Because, perhaps surprisingly, readership appears to be the more fundamental of the two. The evidence for this is that it's usually easy to define readership without mentioning objective, but not vice versa. Try it.

Also, in identifying your readers first, there's a link with management theory, in that writing in which the readers' requirements are put before the writer's objectives is more likely to be effective for the same reasons that businesses that put market requirements before internal ones are more likely to be effective.

9. "...the effectiveness of a communication is measured by the quality of its reception...". This has implications for the assessment of students' written work in communication. Historically the quality of what this book calls informative writing has been assessed by teachers or lecturers. But what have they been assessing? Well, partly they've looked for mastery of certain writing skills. In other words, skills of transmission. But, if the dictum at the head of this topic has any truth, shouldn't they be measuring the quality of the reception?

11. On success...
If people need to know it
They're your target readers.
If they'll buy or borrow it
They're your potential readers.
If they start to read it but break off
They're your lost readers.
If they finish it but forget
They're your token readers.
If they remember and value it
They're your satisfied readers.
If they act on it
That's success.

And if they did switch to measuring the quality of the reception, wouldn't that mean measuring any learning that's taken place? After all, what's the point of communicating informatively, if not for that? If so, the lecturer's problem would be that they probably would have set the assignment in the first place, leaving little or no scope for their own learning from the students' answers. The lecturer will already know the answers.

The implication of this is that the students being assessed should address their writing to a similar group of students rather than to the lecturer, and that these students would then be tested on their understanding of it. In other words, the communication under assessment should shift from one of student-to-assessor to one of student-to-student.

10. A constraint on the need-to-know test: Need-to-know begs the question "Need to know for what?" For action? For the sake of learning? Or for reasons in between? The question has importance because in some circumstances, it can affect how strongly the need-to-know test should be applied. For example, where the ultimate purpose is self-education or some other self-interest, rather than communication, then the distinction between need-to-know and interesting won't be so important.

2 Identify your objective

To instruct a manual
To specify a technical specification
To describe a caption
To explain, to teach a textbook
To provoke discussion a discussion paper
To document for reference a dictionary
To evaluate, to recommend a report

First step
Perhaps bearing in mind the typical objectives listed above, ask yourself what is your objective in your own writing project. It will be more specific than those above, such as perhaps: 'To explain to somebody who has never before used a computer, how to switch it on and display a ready-to-write screen of the WonderWrite word-processing program'. Turn your mind upside down. What is your real objective? When you've come to a conclusion, write it down — in a single statement, if possible, as in the example above. If you have more than one objective, write them each down.

Second step
Then return to the previous topic 'Identify your readership' and complete the third step there, in which you try to judge whether your objective(s) match those of your target readers.

Third step
If you doubt whether they do, you'll usually want to target a different or wider readership, as explained in the fourth step of 'Identify your readership'. But just occasionally you might want to adjust your objective to accommodate what you think your current target readership is looking for. What this amounts to is asking, not 'What is my objective?' but 'What should be my objective?'

In general
Whether it's your readership or your objective that you adjust, such a shift right at the beginning could be crucial to the effectiveness of your document or book.
Practical Notes

1. 'Shift' or 'adjust', not 'change completely': The purpose of the interplay between identifying your readership and identifying your objective is not to prompt you to abandon your original objective. You probably had good reasons for choosing it. The purpose, rather, is to offer a systematic path for adjusting, shifting, customising it in response to any perceived conflict between your initial objective and the needs of the target readership. In other words, the purpose is to harmonise your objective with your target readership, increasing the chance that your work will be read to the full and understood.

2. Different objectives require different document structures, formats and styles of language. If you do return to adjust your objective after getting as far as the Document Plan, you might need to adjust your structure.

3. If your objective is mixed — perhaps to describe and then to instruct — then you should say so in your statement of objective. And when you're ready to start writing you should address these different objectives within separate parts of your document or book, and also explain upfront what you've done.

4. Why do people often start writing without considering their objective? Usually because, without realising it, they're writing for themselves, which doesn't require a clear objective.

5. What is the statement of objective for this book? Without the benefit of the methodology of this book, a statement of objective might have gone something like: 'To offer a general methodology for professionals preparing to undertake any informative writing.'

After applying the methodology, it becomes:
(1) To offer a general methodology for any informative writing in English;
(2) To promote the use of the term 'informative writing' to encompass other terms such as technical writing, business writing, effective writing and functional writing;
(3) To seed modules of informative writing in undergraduate courses for Communications Studies, and for similar courses, where English is the language of study;
(4) To stand as a coursebook for such modules;
(5) To stand as a study skills book for other courses.

See the difference that this methodology can make.

3 Identify your scope

In the context of writing, the distinction between scope and content is a narrow one. The scope of a document is the span of the area covered by the contents, but there may be pockets within that span that the contents don't cover.

So in identifying scope you're interested in defining boundaries — in answering the question "How wide and deep should I cast my net?" The target of this topic is a statement that answers this question for your writing project.

Scope depends upon your readership, your objective, your time (which may mean cost), and also your readers' time (how much do they have?).

First step
From your knowledge of your subject and your initial vision of what you want to say, formulate a statement of scope to work with.

Second step
Set this statement alongside the profile of your target readership and your statement of objective.

Third step
Ask yourself the following questions:
Is my statement of scope consistent with the profile of my target readership and with my statement of objective? Or do they conflict?
How much time have I got?
How much time have they got?
What do I not want to cover?
How short can I make it?

Fourth step:
Modify your statement of scope if necessary, to minimise any conflict between your readership, your objective and your scope.
6 Think about diagrams and pictures

Illustrations can carry information more effectively than text

Illustrations do carry certain types of information more effectively than text. The truth is that most people like looking at pictures more than they like reading text, and so most textual information will benefit from pictures or graphics accompanying it.

But 'most' is not 'all' and so you'll have to judge for yourself whether you should be thinking about illustrations (Does the content warrant illustration? In the type of document or book you're writing, is your readership used to finding illustrations? If not, would they be ready for them?).

If you've decided to include illustrations, before you start to write it's good practice to:

1. decide upon your tactics
2. form an idea of your proposed illustrations
3. list them.

It's important to compile your list of illustrations before you write because, if you write first and think about illustrations afterwards, you risk having to scrap some of your text if you subsequently find that the illustrations can carry the information better.

For this topic then, the product should be a list of the titles of the illustrations you propose to use, stating approximate sizes and whether line drawings or photographs.

Reflective Notes

1. A rule-of-thumb is that diagrams are useful companions for answering the questions "what?" and "how?": Text is best on its own for answering the question "why?"

2. Extremes are often instructive: Some types of information can only be carried in pictures and other types can only be carried in text. For example, you can make a diagram or picture the centrepiece of each page and perhaps add text as a sort of extended caption. But in informative writing only educational books for young children and instructional leaflets for consumer purchases adopt this approach, each for their special reasons. Conversely you can omit illustrations altogether, but informative text without diagrams or pictures can be unattractive to readers and hard-going. Dictionaries manage it because nobody reads them narratively. Some business reports or technical reports manage it too — either because they wouldn't benefit from illustration, or because of convention.

Consequently the idea of trying to use illustrations (images) to explain the nature and practice of writing seemed like a move against the arrow of time. In other words, to the question: "Does this book warrant illustration?", the answer from within was "No". The feeling was that this was one type of book in which information would not be carried more effectively by pictures than by words.

But another answer (the pragmatic one) is that any illustration on a page usually makes the text more attractive and more readable. So, time and economics permitting, any future editions of this book may well be illustrated.
7 Produce the plan

The final step in the planning process is the key one: producing a written plan for the document or book.

Starting from your raw contents list (that is, the shortlist of topics that you’ll have produced in the course of this chapter) the procedure is:

1. Apply the advice and rules for structuring the information
2. Decide which illustrations to use, if any
3. Produce your plan.

You might call this plan a writing plan, an essay plan, a document plan, or a book plan. Whatever the name, it should specify the following:

- a title
- the hierarchy and sequence of topics, probably by chapters and sub-topics
- the location of illustrations
- and particularly for commissioned assignments, an estimate of total number of pages.

For most forms of writing, the document plan will resemble a contents list without page numbers, but with notes and titles of illustrations.

The plan will almost certainly change as you write, perhaps beyond recognition, because writing is a cyclic process of trial, error and refinement. But this doesn’t matter. The job of the plan is to get you started on a good footing and to serve as a flexible framework while you’re writing. It’s there to be changed as you go.
About Chapter 2

In the Writing stage, your objective should be to catch and retain the readers' interest and to compose the most informative paragraphs and sentences for those readers and for that context.

The topics are:

- Write how you speak, then edit
- Words and expressions to avoid
- Within topics, the sequence of information to aim for
- Within paragraphs, the types of sentences to aim for
- Within sentences, the types of words to aim for
- Within sentences, the sequence of phrases to aim for
- Use analogies
- Be surprising
- Make it interesting.

If this chapter appears to be about 'writing by rules', then be assured that it's not. Human discourse and the English language are too complex and too illogical to be fully prescribed by a set of rules. The techniques described in this chapter are just guides for first-try sentences. In each application they should help you to produce a sentence that's more informative than the one you might otherwise have composed. If the sentence also reads well in its context, then use it. If it doesn't, then adjust it using your judgement. This isn't a retreat. Implementing the same techniques slavishly for every circumstance produces monotonous writing, whereas attractive informative writing is marked by its variety. Unfortunately there are no hard and fast rules for originality and variety, and this takes us back to the point made at the end of 'More about this book': that this book confines itself to the possible. Firstly, it will guide you to the most informative structure for each sentence, but sometimes context or idiom will carry more force, and it's up to you to identify these circumstances and to adjust the sentence accordingly. Secondly, it's also up to you to judge where and in what measure to add the vision, humour and emotional colour that will make a piece of writing more interesting, and your own. This chapter points you in the right direction but how far you can go will depend upon your own capabilities.

8 Write how you speak, then edit

Compare the following sentences, left with right, and decide which versions you think are the most readable.

Arguably, most of the writing that is done in the world is informative.

Arguably most of the writing that's done in the world is informative.

Writing informatively for oneself has only two productive applications: a private diary, and as an exercise in learning and remembering.

Writing informatively for yourself makes sense for just two things: a private diary, and to help you learn and remember.

However, you might consider why you are reading this book. Probably you have decided you need to improve your writing skills.

But why are you reading this book? Probably you've decided you need to improve your writing skills.

So in general:

Cut punctuation to the minimum

Use contracted combinations of words such as that's rather than that is

Use 'you' or 'yourself' (second person singular) rather than one, oneself, the reader or the user (indefinite third person singulars)

Prefer casual words and phrases to more formal ones (such as But rather than However)

Prefer a word of one syllable to a word of two or three (such as just rather than only)

Don't be afraid to pose questions directly.
9 Words and expressions to avoid

In place of these...

- as, since
due to the fact that
in view of the fact that

- is equipped with
is provided with
consists of

- in conjunction with
with the aid of
in order to
throughout the entire
an example of this is
final result
collect together

- in close proximity to
in spite of
in the course of

- commence, initiate
conclude, finalise, terminate
prior to
subsequent to
in many cases
in the majority of instances
a number of
numerous
pertaining to

- assist
attempt, endeavour
allow, enable, permit
demonstrate, illustrate, indicate
facilitate
require
utilise

...consider trying these:

- because
- has
- with
- near
- begin, start
- end, finish
- before
- mostly, usually, generally
- some
- many
- help
- try
- show
- simplify, ease, make easier
- need
- use

In general:

Prefer short words to long words

Prefer familiar words to unfamiliar words

Prefer accurate terms to vague terms

Prefer concise phrasing to wordy phrasing

Avoid adjectives unless they add important information

Avoid jargon unless it's shorthand between experts.

In summary: Be direct.
Practical Note

1. On the first page of this topic at the head of the twin columns, notice these words: ‘in place of these...consider trying these’. So the suggested replacements aren’t prescriptions that will always work better. For example, the expression ‘consists of’ is often just right for the context, but just sometimes you can replace it with ‘is’ or ‘has’, to better effect.

2. In Appendix A there’s a further list of words and expressions to avoid, reproduced from an entertaining book called ‘Utter Drivel’ published by The Plain English Campaign in the UK.

10 Within topics, the sequence of information to aim for

1 Most interesting first

An effective technique, borrowed from journalism, is to copy the most interesting piece of information from the topic and to place it at the front. This might distort the chronological (or other- logical) sequence, but a quick explanation will put this right, and the pay-off in grabbing readers’ attention will usually make it worthwhile.

2 ‘Need-to-know’

In the remainder of your topic, you should give precedence to information that the reader needs to know. You’ll help your readers by subordinating information that’s either supporting or merely interesting. You can do this by presenting the subordinate information as Notes, or in a box, or on a shaded background, or in a parallel column as here — or on a separate page and possibly in a different format, as with the Notes throughout this book.

3 Examples before generalisations

Leading with examples usually engages readers’ attention better and holds their interest better than leading with the generalisation and following with examples. Learning from experience and example is the way we learn most things in life, from our first day. From these lessons we build our own rules, which we use to predict the outcomes of our actions and of others. Learning by experience and example is deep but laborious — too laborious for the classroom. Some teachers, lecturers and textbook writers try to shortcut this process by giving the rule first, but the effect is more like a short-circuit. A better way is to precede the rule with a few key examples. (This point relates to ‘Structure your content’, Note 1, in Chapter 1.)
11 Within paragraphs, the types of sentences to aim for

Three principles to bear in mind. To demonstrate the first one, an example:

Your writing vocabulary is a product of your lifetime reading.

Use the definite person ('I', 'we' or 'you') rather than the indefinite person ('one', 'the reader', or 'the user').

To demonstrate the second principle:

Except for very small projects, you should not proceed to the Writing stage before you have produced a document plan.

The left-hand version is in the passive form (the passive 'voice') and the right-hand version is in the active form (the active voice). Can you see the difference? It's that passive forms are usually less direct, less informative, have less impact, and generally use more words.

However, in a few situations they are appropriate, such as...

...when the reader doesn't need to know who is performing the action...
...when you genuinely don't know who is performing the action...
...when you want to conceal who is performing the action...
...and sometimes when you're writing about a machine or a system.

But these are the exceptions. In general:

Prefer the active form to the passive.

To demonstrate the third principle:

Your writing vocabulary is a product of your lifetime reading.

English is a very extensive and flexible language.

Be specific rather than general.
12 Within paragraphs, the sequence of sentences to aim for

The English language is a big toy-box — a deep treasure chest — for poets, novelists, humorists and other creative writers. This is wonderful for them. It offers them many opportunities for exploiting shades of meaning and for constructive ambiguity because it usually offers several ways to say the same thing. This is because of its flexible word order, absence of gender agreements, and large vocabulary.

English is a language with a large vocabulary, no gender agreements, and a flexible word order. This means it usually offers several ways to say the same thing, with many opportunities for exploiting shades of meaning and for constructive ambiguity. For poets, novelists, humorists and other creative writers this is wonderful — English is a big toy-box, a deep treasure chest.

In the better version on the right-hand side the sequence of phrases or statements is:

1. English is a language with a large vocabulary, no gender agreements, and a flexible word order.
2. This means it usually offers several ways to say the same thing
3. with many opportunities for exploiting shades of meaning and for constructive ambiguity.
4. For poets, novelists, humorists and other creative writers
5. this is wonderful — English is a big toy-box, a deep treasure chest.

Notice how the sequence above relates to the sequence below:

1. Context or background
2. Main point or activity
3. Result
4. Qualification or limitation
5. Conclusion.

More examples:

It's usually practicable to pursue only two of the many things about your target readership that you might research.

Choose the objective that's closest to yours, from the list above.

Sorting by readership isn't a criterion at all if your readership is single-type.

Of the many things about your target readership that you might research, it's usually practicable to pursue only two.

From the list of objectives above, choose the one that's closest to yours.

If your readership is single-type, sorting by readership isn't a criterion at all.

In summary the trick is to:

First, establish the context or background, as a framework into which the main point can embed itself. Sometimes the context may take the form of a statement of purpose, or a condition.

Second, state the main point.

Third, state the result (although if the context took the form of a purpose which has obviously been achieved, a statement of result will be redundant).

And then if appropriate...

Fourth, include any supplementary information that might limit, change or augment the information in either the context, the main point or the result.

Fifth, end with a conclusion. (There will often be a distinction between the result and a conclusion.)

However, this isn't a prescription for every paragraph. The sequence above is simply one that should produce a good informative sentence as a first try, most of the time.

But, for example, if a qualification is a major one that affects the whole context, then it can precede the main point. This goes for limitations and variations too.
19 Check structure...

The cascade below shows the full hierarchy of information it's possible to meet in books, reports, and other modern documentation. Your draft contents list will be a version of this cascade — but probably not the full version, unless your project is very large.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volumes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parts (or Sections)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chapters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paragraphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>words.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The check for structure consists of re-applying to your draft contents list (and to any sub-contents lists) the techniques of the topic 'Structure your content' in Chapter 1, making changes if necessary.

...and signposting

You might know from your own experience that in order to digest large amounts of written information you must be able to perceive its structure (which usually means its hierarchy) before you start reading. The best tools for signposting (that is to say, highlighting or pointing out) structure are listed below. Some are really only for handbooks and manuals.

- a contents list
- a preface
- a flow-chart of the book or document
- section dividers with protruding tags
- page headers and footers
- chapter titles and section headings
- page titles
- phrases in the body text (such as 'in the next chapter...')
- boxes and/or tinted backgrounds
- introductions and summaries.

Chapter titles and section headings:
Hierarchy can be denoted by typography, by successive indenting, and by decimal numbering. Here are some special hints: In respect of:

- Typography: Use a larger typsize than at first you might be inclined to.
- Position: Be inclined to centre the text across the page rather than to left-justify, even for section headings. This is because text in the centre is more likely to catch the eye and because most people find symmetry inherently attractive.
- Paragraph numbering: Introduce for reference works but not for when the document or book is to be read narratively from beginning to end.
- Text: Keep your chapter titles and section headings short (key words only, as far as possible).

Page titles: When it comes to reading text that's primarily informative — rather than persuasive or creative — many readers are thought to prefer one topic per page, with a topic title at the top of each page, as in this book (see also in Chapter 5, the topic 'One topic per page'). Given this, the same advice applies as to chapter titles and section headings.

Inserting signposting phrases in the body text:
Here are some examples:
- 'At this point...'
- 'This chapter consists of...
- 'You'll need this list shortly'
- 'The instruction at the top of the previous page...'

Such phrases help readers to perceive the map of the subject area that the writer holds in his or her head.

Boxes and tinted backgrounds: Effective. They improve attractiveness and readability. Also, readers can see the end before they start, which improves motivation. But you'll need the technology to produce them.

Introductions and summaries: Important, but keep them brief.
20 Check sentences

You refine your text by applying certain tests to it. But if you've several tests to apply, it's difficult to hold them all in your mind as you read. Your mind tends to linger on the last item that threw up a correction or an improvement, and you miss items that need improving on other grounds. The trick is to apply just a single test as you read through the text, and then leave the other tests for subsequent passes. This takes longer but produces a better edit. Bearing this in mind, here are seven quick checks. The first one concerns sequence...

Does the structure of most sentences present the information in the following order?
- Context / main point / any result / any supplementary information / any conclusion

...and the other six concern style...
- Where the passive form occurs, would the active be better?
- Where the indefinite person occurs, would the definite be better?
- Is it possible to eliminate any words?
- Is it possible to be more specific?
- Is it possible to replace a long word by a short one?
- Is it possible to replace an unfamiliar word with a familiar one?

These seven are distilled from the principles listed in 'Summary of Chapter 2'. The reduction to these seven is for practicality. Read through the others periodically and try to bear them in mind. Eventually you'll internalise them and they'll start to shape your writing without you being aware of it.

Obviously you should also correct errors of spelling, grammar and punctuation but these are outside the scope of this book, apart from the topics of Chapter 7. Some books that cover these topics are listed in Further reading at the end of this book.

Finally and importantly, no matter how much you've already revised a draft, it's always possible to revise it more, so at some point you just have to call a stop. You should decide on this point in advance.

21 Enlist reviewers

A draft reviewer is someone who comments on your draft before you distribute it to the readers. The idea is that the reviewer points out errors or room for improvement before the first readers do — whether they be your boss, your lecturer, a publisher or others.

Why should a reviewer be able to do this better than you? The answer is simply by not being the writer. From the moment you start to think about and research your subject, you begin to put distance between yourself and your prospective readers. Certainly by the time you've produced a first full draft you'll be too deep into your subject to be able to summon an outsider's perspective. By then you're definitely not a typical reader. Because of this the reviewing process is accepted as an essential part of the writing sequence by professional informative writers such as technical writers.

In enlisting reviewers you should look for people who fit the profile of your target reader. If you appoint reviewer(s) who don't, you risk acting on opinions that might make the document or book less effective, not more. It's also important that reviewers should be intelligent, articulate and literate, and it helps if they're detached from you personally and emotionally. If the topic is specialised, they'll need to be familiar with the subject area within which the topic sits, but not necessarily with the topic itself. You can enlist a single reviewer or several, but more than three usually makes the review process unwieldy.

When you send your draft out for review, you should enclose with it a letter of instruction, or a Review Form, such as the one shown in Appendix C. The letter of instruction should specify the following:

- Which in the planned sequence of drafts, this one is.
- What aspects you would welcome comments on. These should be:
  - the target readership: is it the right one?
  - if it is right, have you actually written for it?
  - your declared scope: have you actually kept to it?
  - the structure and sequence of topics: are they right? are topics missing?
  - the approach: is it right?
  - any errors of fact, omission, distortion, emphasis, grammar, spelling or punctuation?
  - the writing style: is it brief? readable? appropriate to the readership?
- A date for the return of the reviewed draft.
And then there’s the way that the identity of informative writing is diffused by the terms technical writing, business writing, effective writing and functional writing — each of which falls short of representing the whole genre to advantage.

It’s true that technical writing has some recognition as a job and a set of skills, and so perhaps in a way it has stood for the whole of informative writing. Unfortunately, in the UK at least, it has a poor image. You can test this at any social gathering by telling some people that you’re a writer and others that you’re a technical writer, and comparing the responses. Part of the problem — again in the UK at least — is that word ‘technical’.

At this point we leave behind what’s open to influence, because what has to be acknowledged is that creative writing tends to be about people, and addresses our emotions, whereas informative writing tends to be about ideas, things, processes or techniques and addresses our reasoning. Only ideas can be as powerful and seductive as emotions and, even then, not for most people.

Linked to this is most people’s perception that success in creative writing brings fame and money, whereas they have no perception of informative writing at all, least of all success in it.

And finally, within the UK there’s the legacy of the British colonial past: a culture that valued the English language above all for its literature and for the opportunities it afforded for delineating status. In Britain this culture persists to this day. It’s noticeable that Americans — who didn’t have an emprise to live off and had to use the English language in a much more workaday fashion — still write less pretentiously than the British, on the whole.

Now for the remedies. From all this, the suggestions are, first, that only the identity and the teaching of informative writing are open to influence; and second, that for informative writing to achieve the status of creative writing, two things need to happen. Firstly, publishers, booksellers, librarians, writers, journalists, broadcasters, educators and ultimately the various reading publics should be brought to recognise the term informative writing as the encompassing term for technical writing and business writing, and as the replacement term for effective writing and functional writing. And secondly, educationalists should consider the merits of introducing modules in informative writing throughout all levels of their national secondary and tertiary education. A modest agenda.

Is all writing a mix of informative and creative?

There are other ways to put this question, such as:

- Does all writing spring just from information and our imagination?
- Are informative writing and creative writing the only fundamental types?
- Is there a type that’s neither informative nor creative, nor a hybrid?

To answer these questions we need definitions of informative writing and of creative writing against which to test examples. Consider these definitions, line-parsed to enhance clarity:

Informative writing is where the objective is to transfer information from the mind of the writer to the mind of the reader, briefly and readably with minimum loss or distortion.

Creative writing is where the immediate objective is either simply to express the writer’s own emotions or feelings, or to create characters and circumstances in order to evoke an emotional or spiritual response in readers, or both.

In the most ambitious creative writing the ultimate objective is to explore those parts of the human experience not accessible by logic or reason. Whatever the objective, the techniques of creative writing involve imaginatively and constructively creating, relating, juxtaposing, distorting or omitting information.

In practice most writing is weakly hybrid: that is to say, either informative with dashes of creative, or creative tempered with informative. Where the informative and the creative are more or less equally balanced — such as in biography and journalism — we could call them strong hybrids.

A hybrid is where the writer holds two objectives simultaneously: first, to transfer information to the reader, and second, to evoke an emotional or spiritual response in the reader.

But what types of writing might escape these definitions? For example, beliefs and opinions? Are they creative, or informative, or neither? And what of prayers, hymns and chants? (Anderson). Let’s get rigorous, as John Travolta once nearly sang...
Why punctuation matters

Because grammar and context can’t always resolve ambiguity, particularly where long sentences are unavoidable.

Punctuation is a symbolic vocabulary, a form of shorthand. Treating it as a vocabulary, take a look at these summaries of usages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>full stop</td>
<td>At the end of a sentence or expression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>;</td>
<td>semi-colon</td>
<td>Where the next statement either says the same thing as the preceding statement but in a different way, or is a many-worded item in a list of items.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| :   | colon      | (1) Where what follows expands or adds to the preceding statement, either as a list, or as another statement or sequence of statements.  
             (2) Where what follows contrasts with the statement that preceded. |
| ,    | comma      | (The comma does too many different jobs to explain here, which is why it’s easy to use incorrectly.) |

This table hints at the problem with punctuation. Often one symbol carries more than one meaning, or sometimes two symbols carry the same meaning. No wonder people have trouble. From its origins possibly in early printing in Venice in the late 15th or early 16th centuries, it seems that punctuation evolved to the point where it did the job passably well — given knowledgeable writers and readers — but no better, no further. As with spelling there was no single designer, and it shows.

Modern practice is to punctuate as little as possible. One way is to insert no punctuation at all until you reach the end of each paragraph, then to add just sufficient to resolve any ambiguities that you think might confuse your reader.

Summary of Chapter 7

Why do spelling, grammar and punctuation matter in informative writing? Because to be effective, informative writing must be concise, unambiguous and authoritative — and yet be attractive to read. In achieving this, competent spelling, grammar and punctuation help to eliminate ambiguity and retain authority.

But they only help because, first, English spelling is idiosyncratic and easy to get wrong; second, English grammar (although easy to learn) permits ambiguity; and third, the rules of punctuation are often not clearly defined. This leaves context as the final defence.

As a result, writing clearly and concisely on complex matters in English is difficult enough even if you’re competent in spelling, grammar and punctuation. If you’re not, it can be almost impossible.

To know how to break the rules you must know how to use them: With a well-educated readership, breaking the formal rules of grammar or punctuation can be an effective way of making a point. But only if you’ve already demonstrated that you know the rules back to front, otherwise your knowledgeable readers will assume you don’t even know them front to back.

Once you’ve established your mastery beyond doubt, the effectiveness of your rule-breaking will depend upon the panache with which you do it.

And incidentally, notice that wherever ambiguity is unresolved by grammar, punctuation or context, conditions are ripe for a joke. Perhaps this is why English has proved so rich for comedians and other humorists.
Appendix A

More words and expressions to avoid

The words and expressions below are taken from a book called ‘Utter Drivel’ published by the Plain English Campaign in the UK. They're words that often get used in letters and reports. Usually they add nothing to the message and you can remove them without changing the meaning or the tone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a total of</th>
<th>each and every one</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>absolutely</td>
<td>existing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abundantly</td>
<td>extremely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>actually</td>
<td>I am of the opinion that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all things being equal</td>
<td>I would like to say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a matter of fact</td>
<td>in due course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as far as I am concerned</td>
<td>in other words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at the end of the day</td>
<td>in the end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at this moment in time</td>
<td>in the final analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>basically</td>
<td>in this connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>current</td>
<td>in total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>currently</td>
<td>in view of the fact that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>during the period from</td>
<td>it should be understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>last but not least</td>
<td>obviously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of course</td>
<td>other things being equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quite</td>
<td>really</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>really quite</td>
<td>regarding the ......, it was ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the fact of the matter is</td>
<td>the month(s) of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to all intents and purposes</td>
<td>to one's own mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more words and phrases to avoid, get the ‘Plain English Campaign's A-Z Guide of Alternative Words’. It's a 14-page pamphlet that lists hundreds of words and phrases alphabetically, in the style of an index. The Plain English Campaign is at PO Box 3, New Mills, High Peak, SK22 4QP, UK. Tel: 01663 744 409. Fax: 01663 747 038. Email: info@plaineng.demon.co.uk. Website: www.demon.co.uk/plainenglish.