

THE FIVE MOST COMMON WRITING ERRORS

...and how to avoid them

Laura Brown, Ph.D.

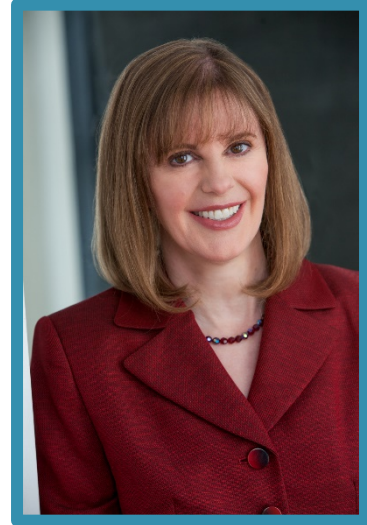
*Author of **How to Write Anything: A
Complete Guide** (WW Norton)*
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Dear Reader,

Did you know that writing concise, clear, and compelling prose can dramatically improve your career success?

It's true. People judge you by your writing, especially when you're not there to interact face to face. If you write well, your readers form a good opinion of you. If you don't, they may form the opposite opinion.



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Take a minute to answer the following questions:

Do you procrastinate about writing or get bogged down in writing tasks?

Do you struggle with writing and wish it were easier?

Do you worry that your writing doesn't get the results you want?

If you answered yes to these questions, you'll find help in this report. The report will help you:

- Stop worrying and start writing confidently and effectively
- Get through all your writing tasks more quickly and efficiently
- Successfully persuade and move people through your writing.

You will learn writing skills and strategies that you can use in any writing task you need to do—at work, at school, and in your personal life.

Laura Brown

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The Five Most Common Writing Errors—and How to Avoid Them

No matter where you're writing—at work, at school, or in your personal life—there are a few basic errors that make writing harder and can hurt the quality of your writing.

Problem #1: Not planning

Problem #2: Not fully understanding your purpose

Problem #3: Not understanding your reader

Problem #4: Not using drafts

Problem #5: Not proofreading

The good news is that if you can become aware of these common problems, you can learn to avoid them and become a more confident, productive, and successful writer.

Let's get started!

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Problem #1: Not planning

The number-one problem in most kinds of writing—whether it’s at work, at school, or in your personal life—is not taking the time to plan. Any document longer than one or two lines will benefit from at least some degree of planning. **The more important the document is, the more carefully you should plan it.**

What happens if you don’t plan? You may overlook something that’s important to your reader. You may leave out important information. You may end up with a document that’s too long or disorganized and hard to follow. If you fail to plan, you might find that you’re not really clear about what you’re trying to achieve with the document you’re writing. Ultimately, **an unplanned document is often a document that does a poor job of communicating and doesn’t get the results you want.**

But isn’t planning a big hassle? Not really. You might be surprised to learn that it’s much easier than you think. Most of us were taught in school to construct elaborate outlines with Roman numerals, capital and small letters, and so forth. That kind of outlining can be a valuable skill if you’re writing a long and complicated document, but for most writing tasks, **the planning can be much simpler.**

Here’s a quick way to plan almost any document you have to write. As you begin your writing task, ask yourself **these five questions:**

1. What’s my **purpose**? What am I trying to achieve with this document?
2. Who’s my **reader**? What do they need and expect from me?
3. What’s the best way to **persuade or impress** my reader?
4. Do I have all the **information** I need to write this document?
5. How should I **order** the information I have?

After you’ve answered these five questions, you can decide how to proceed. You may feel ready to start writing immediately, or you may feel you need to do some research before you start. You might even decide that you do need to write a formal outline. Whatever your next step, you’ll find that doing some planning will lead to a more successful final document. What’s more, taking a few minutes to plan **can actually save you time** by helping you to avoid false starts and multiple rewrites.

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Problem #2: Not fully understanding your purpose

Have you ever received one of those long, rambling e-mails? You read on and on, and the writer doesn't get to the point until the third or fourth paragraph...or more likely you just gave up and quit reading. Why do people write long, unfocused messages like these? The reason is often that they **weren't really thinking about their purpose** when they were writing, so the final product ended up long, muddy, and ineffective.

If you don't fully understand your purpose in writing, you risk not including the right information in your document, you might include a lot of irrelevant information, and you're likely to go on too long, creating a bulky document your reader won't want to read.

To put it another way, **if you don't know exactly what you're trying to achieve with your writing, you likely won't achieve it.**

For an example, let's look at a complaint letter or e-mail. Far too many writers treat these as an opportunity just to vent, when the real purpose behind them is usually to ask for some sort of remedy. They include long descriptions of the bad experience they had, but they neglect to ask for what they want—a refund, a replacement, compensation, etc.—leaving the reader to guess how to satisfy them. Your reader should be able to understand your request from your message: she shouldn't have to read your mind, too. When you **understand your purpose**, you can ask explicitly for what you want, and you stand a better chance of getting it.

Cover letters for resumes are another good example. Many people write these letters with the idea "I want that job." The trouble is, a resume cover letter alone can't get you the job. The purpose of such a letter is to highlight important information on your resume and provide other relevant information so that the reader will want to bring you in for an interview. **The more clearly you understand that purpose, the more successfully you can craft your letter.**

In academic writing, you can think of your thesis statement as a kind of **statement of purpose**. If you keep your thesis in mind as you write, you're less likely to drift off topic or include irrelevant information.

To get the results you want from your writing, take a moment to **pinpoint exactly what your purpose is**, then develop your document to support that purpose.

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Problem #3: Not understanding your reader

Too often we think only about ourselves when we write. While it's smart to have a clear idea of your purpose, you're only half of the communication equation—the other half is your reader. Before you write, take some time to think about your reader—who is she? What does she expect? How is she likely to respond to what you've written? **If you really understand your reader's needs and expectations, your writing project—whatever it is—will be more successful.**

Let's look at an example. Say you're writing to your boss to ask him to purchase a software package that will make your job easier. Instead of just describing what the software could do for you, consider your boss' perspective. How much will the software cost? Is there a budget for it? What tangible benefit might your boss see from investing in the software? If you think just from your own point of view—"I want this"—your case will be much weaker than if you take the time to understand your boss' likely position. If you're really hoping to persuade your reader, **your message should include information that will appeal to your reader's interests and motivate him to say yes to your request.**

Putting yourself in your reader's shoes can help even if you don't know exactly who your reader is. Let's think about that complaint letter again. In most cases, the person who will read your complaint isn't the person who caused the problem; she's probably a customer service representative who reads angry messages all day long. You can make her life a little easier—and **increase your chances of getting what you want**—by writing a courteous, concise message with a clear request that's easy for her to act on.

Understanding your reader's expectations is one of the keys to **successful writing in school and college**. Be sure you understand exactly what the assignment is; if you're not sure what's expected of you, ask your instructor for clarification.

Considering your reader is a simple act of courtesy, but it also **goes beyond that**. When you take into account your reader's needs, expectations, and attitude, you're in a far better position to create a successful piece of writing.

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Problem #4: Not using drafts

First drafts are rarely perfect. Even the most successful writers usually don't get it right the first time, and they understand that working with drafts can help create a concise and polished document. And yet how many of us send important e-mails or hand in papers that are basically just unrevised first drafts? You could get lucky, but **your luck—and your success as a writer—will improve if you learn to use drafts for your important documents.**

What's wrong with using your first draft as your final draft? Potentially, a lot of things. An unrevised first draft is likely to be incomplete. Its purpose may not be clear. It's probably not well positioned to appeal to the reader—it's likely just to be a "brain dump" of information, not something that will get you the results you want. Finally, a first draft is also more likely to contain errors that you could eliminate if you took the time to revise and refine the draft.

In an ideal world, you'd have time to write a full first draft and leave it alone for a day or so before you go back and revise it. **If you're short of time, though, you can still take advantage of working with drafts.** A "rest" of even an hour between drafts will give you a different perspective on your document and help you take a more objective view when you go to revise it. If you're really strapped for time, go back and re-read **Problem #1** in this document—the section about planning—and ask yourself those **five key questions** about your draft. Use those questions as a shortcut to help focus your thinking and guide your revision, even when you don't have a lot of time.

Often we find ourselves short of time because we've procrastinated about starting to write. Procrastination about writing is an extremely common problem—you're not alone! If you experience problems with procrastination or writer's block, have a look at the e-book "**Overcoming Writer's Block**" at www.howtowriteanything.com. The book offers 17 proven exercises to help you start writing and keep writing till you have a full draft.

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Problem #5: Not proofreading

In this age of spell-check, grammar-check, and autocorrect, is proofreading really necessary? Yes! In fact, it's more important now than it's ever been. **We're writing more and writing faster today than we ever did in the past, and the risk of making careless mistakes is greater than ever before.**

When you don't take the time to proofread, you can't check your content. You risk omitting important information or including inaccurate information, which can lead to time-consuming follow-ups. You may miss typos that can obscure your meaning. It's easy, for example, to type 5:00 when you mean 6:00, and if you don't proofread, you may be receiving guests an hour before you're ready for them. Finally, when you fail to proofread, you may leave **bone-headed grammar and spelling errors that will make you look ignorant and careless.**

Spell-check can't guess what you mean. Mignon Fogarty, better known as Grammar Girl (www.grammargirl.com) asked her readers to write in with some of their funniest errors.¹ One reader shared a recommendation she received, saying the job candidate was a "fat and accurate typist" instead of "fast and accurate." Another submitted a memo entitled "Meet with Christ in Tulsa"—the writer meant "Chris." Errors like this are completely beyond the capability of spell-checking software to correct.

Autocorrect programs do guess what you mean, but they're often wrong. In the same article, another Grammar Girl reader reported that thanks to his spellchecker he sent an e-mail to "Dr. Moron" instead of "Dr. Morrison." If you haven't yet visited the website www.damnyouautocorrect.com, you're in for a treat of hilarious autocorrect gaffes. Although the examples there are funny, autocorrect can create serious confusion, and you can't trust it with your important e-mails and other documents.

When it comes to proofreading, there's just no substitute for a human eye attached to an alert human brain.

¹ "Readers Share Their Funny Errors" by Mignon Fogarty. January 21, 2010.
<http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/funny-typos.aspx>

About *How to Write Anything*

“Now *this* is a reference book worth owning!”
—*Entertainment Weekly* (May 30, 2014)

[*How to Write Anything: A Complete Guide*](#) (WW Norton, 2014) is an Amazon #1 bestseller that combines unique writing methodologies with a comprehensive encyclopedia of over 150 writing tasks, complete with model outlines, dos and don'ts, and examples—designed to help you get through all of life's writing tasks.

Writing is more important now than it's ever been. At work, at school, in our personal lives—business and personal e-mails; online reviews and forums; proposals and reports; resumes and cover letters; blogs, tweets, and text messages—we're all writing more than ever before.

Now there's a resource for all your writing needs: *How to Write Anything* offers concise guidance and good models to help you get all your writing tasks done quickly and painlessly. A comprehensive reference, *How to Write Anything* is the only practical writing book you'll ever need. Learn more at www.howtowriteanything.com!

“Laura Brown has written the ultimate guide for anyone who needs to create clear, concise, and compelling written communications. With all of its dos and don'ts, good and bad examples, and perfect models, the book not only teaches good writing; it's like having a virtual ghostwriter looking over your shoulder and helping you craft the perfect message. Students, business people, and even seasoned professional writers should keep *How to Write Anything* handy, right between their dictionary and thesaurus.”

— **Michael Snell, literary agent, writing collaborator, and author of *From Book Idea to Bestseller***

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About Laura Brown

Laura Brown, Ph.D., is a New York-based writer and writing consultant who has taught writing to just about everyone—from corporate executives to high school students. Her expertise encompasses instructor-led training, individual coaching, classroom teaching, and e-learning development as well as audio, video, and webinar training for businesses, non-profits, and educational institutions.

Laura’s clients include AOL Time Warner, Booz Allen Hamilton, the China Europe International Business School, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Citigroup, Columbia Business School, Columbia University Division of Continuing Education, Corning Inc., DHL, The Dalton School, Deloitte, Dun & Bradstreet, GE, McKinsey & Company, MetLife, TMP Worldwide, Trinity School, Warburg Pincus, the Wharton School, and Workforce Technologies.

Laura is available for workshops, trainings, and speeches for your organization. Please visit www.howtowriteanything.com for information.

“Laura is an astute collaborator and coach. She has a gift for helping business writers focus, refine, and develop their ideas, and express those ideas in a compelling way.”

— **Robert C. Daugherty**

Chairman, Executive Dean, Forbes School of Business

“Laura taught communications courses in our professional training programs for a number of years and consistently received positive feedback from students through their evaluations and testimonials. If you’re looking for a writing coach, you need look no further.”

— **Dennis Green**

Director, Master of Science Programs School of Continuing Education,
Columbia University

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“Laura is expert at teaching American business communication. Our work was customized and targeted to my needs, and it helped significantly in improving communications to an international audience. Now fifteen years after first working with Laura, I still call on her for her writing and editing expertise.”

— **Anita Gupta**

Head of Corporate Communications and Sustainability DHL Asia-Pacific,
Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa

“Working with Laura over numerous writing projects has made me not just a better writer but also a better thinker. She is sensitive to cultural nuances in language and their impact on business communication. I recommend her highly as a coach and a writer.”

— **Ming-Jer Chen**

Leslie E. Grayson Professor of Business Administration, The Darden School
of Business, University of Virginia; Chinese University of Hong Kong

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