Writing from Scratch

Do you ever have to write about something important, but you don't know where to start? Business or science writing, essays, memoires, projects, reports—you know there are some good ideas floating around, but how can you get them flowing into a workable document? This simple system derives from decades of technical, business, and creative writing projects, and I'm still amazed how effective this approach can be. There are also a few tips on creating solid prose that might help in any writing situation. —*Allen*

Introduction

Purpose

To discover one's own thinking on a subject, and to discover the most natural structure for presenting it. Also, if taken to the end, to build, with minimum confrontation of the blank page, a fully fleshed-out piece of writing without gaps and logical *cul de sacs*. Of course, this process is meant to be taught interactively, not by reading a sheet of instructions, but I have found it can work for some people without my being there to fill in the gaps.

Method

The following procedure is meant to be followed step by step. Naturally, any creative process must deviate from procedure when the flow gets moving, but in general—at least one time through—try to follow this process from the beginning steps to the end, rather than skipping steps or rearranging them.

Note that this method is designed specifically for overcoming writer's block and discovering the ideas floating around in your subconscious, perhaps just out of sight. If you're already inspired, then most of this procedure is irrelevant: skip it and just *write!*

Phase 1 — Start Writing Sentences

A. Write a sentence.

Topic: Anything you like, but don't forget the *subject* you're hoping to expound upon. Every sentence is also a paragraph in its own right, so make sure there's plenty of space between them.

The whole of Phase 1 is for discovery. You already know dozens of relevant things about the subject, no matter what impression you may have about your level of expertise. At this stage, all we want to do is discover whatever thoughts and ideas are lurking just below the surface. But it's also important to get the writing started, to get the brain warmed up for writing, to begin just writing without getting in your own way. For this, writing about any-thing will help—it opens up the flow from your mind to your fingertips.

So we start by just writing any sentence. But note that a sentence is a statement, not just a group of words. The old approach of writing a topic outline may be helpful at a meeting or on the train, but when it comes time to write—it is a trap. Putting down phrases trains the brain to accept them as shorthand for something to be expanded later on. They encourage you to move on, instead of encouraging complete thoughts. Phrases are nothing but re-minders, words floating in space without direction. Every sentence is an assertion of some kind, a description, a judgment, even a question. Write only complete sentences, or this whole process probably won't work.

B. Write more sentences.

Never write anything but simple declarative sentences. Don't get fancy. If a sentence starts growing into a big compound thing, fine—but when it's written, break it up into a small set of simple, declarative sentences. (Each point of embellishment should just be another sentence.)

C. You're not really **writing** yet.

Notice that what you're creating at this point is not "writing" in the usual sense of an essay or dissertation. It has no need for structure, and it can be as incoherent and off-topic as it wants. The key is to get out of your own way and let any idea come at any time, without trying to "sound good." Remember, you're not really "writing." Nobody will read this and nobody will give you a grade.

D. Don't worry about grammar.

Don't think about grammar, spelling, style, clarity, quality, or anything else but the idea you're putting into sentence form. Style and polish are easy to do later on, and can't be done properly at this stage anyway.

E. Keep writing sentences.

Write more sentences until at least one full page is sprinkled with them. Even "I don't like writing sentences" or "I don't know anything about this topic" are valid. See where they lead. Be honest or be whimsical, but keep writing sentences. Take as much time as you need for a full page, or one or two dozen sentences.

Phase 2 — Rearrange Sentences

A. Take a break.

Knock off, and forget about what you've just done.

This is almost as important as writing the first batch of sentences, even if they seem to have gotten nowhere. You've created a **demand** in your brain to **find things** related to the main topic. It takes a while for brains to perform this kind of work, and 99% of it is done in the background, without "your" help. So take a walk or a shower or pet the dog or feed the goldfish. Let your intellect shut off for a little while so the deep processes can do their magic. And it is magic, believe me—no writer ever really knows where it all comes from, especially the Good Stuff.

B. Return to the page of sentences.

Read through every one. Some, not all, will obviously be irrelevant (like the one that says, "I hate this process"). Delete those.

But you may say, what if all of them are irrelevant? What if I end up with nothing? In that case, which is incredibly rare, just go back to Phase 1. Perhaps surf Google on your topic for a few minutes before starting over. Frankly, it's hard to believe anyone would be trying to write about something that doesn't bring up a single relevant thought. **Why** are you trying to write about it? There must be some sentences in the answer to that.

C. Some sentences are more important than others.

Move the important ones to the top. Don't indent these—they may eventually become your Main Points.

D. Some sentences are clearly subordinate to others.

Indent the subordinate ones, and move them under the more important ones they pertain to. If a sentence is clearly subordinate, but its "parent" isn't there, just indent it under a question mark. Or perhaps the sentence it belongs under is obvious, in which case just write it!

> *E. Some sentences will be orphans.*

There may be none, or dozens, of left-overs. If they're not irrelevant, then just leave these "orphans" alone. They'll reveal their purpose soon enough.

Phase 3 — Write More Sentences

> *A. Take a break to review.*

Give what's on the page a little time to percolate into your subconscious. Remember, you created a demand in Phase 1, and your brain is already reorganizing things to meet that demand. Breaks between Phases are an important part of the process. They give the physiology time to switch gears and engage the magic.

> *B. Try a little elaboration.*

One or two (or more) sentences will be begging for a little elaboration. Go ahead and write more sentences under them. But keep to simple, declarative statements, without letting style and presentation and art creep in.

> *C. Even a simple sentence is an assertion.*

Note that every sentence is a declarative statement, a point that you're making, even in its simplest form. You'll find that some sentences need to be reworded to make their point more directly. Don't fancy it up, just tweak it if clarification is needed. If more than a few words need to be added, consider whether they may be more helpful if you just add one or two new sentences. Keep it simple. Style is for later.

> *D. Check for missing sentences.*

Perhaps an important concept is stated in one place, and another important concept in another, but there is no way to get from one idea to the other. What statement or assertion is missing?

> *E. Check again for subordinate sentences.*

By now, a few more sentences have become obviously subordinate. Indent them and drag up or down wherever they best belong.

> *F. Check all the left-over sentences.*

Orphaned sentences from the previous pass may now have a place. Move them there.

G. Check for irrelevant sentences.

By now, some sentences may clearly belong in a different project—another chapter, another book, a supporting document, an appendix, a letter to a friend, a footnote, or whatever. Move them to another text document for future review. Get them out of sight.

Phase 4 — Lather, Rinse, Repeat

A. Repeat Phases 1-3 a few more times.

You probably know enough now (about what you're actually writing) to make a few more improvements by repeating the first three Phases. If not, you're ready for the next step.

B. Fill in some gaps.

By now you can probably see one or more **dense areas** with plenty of sentences, and some **sparse areas** where ideas are missing. Fill in the sparse areas with at least one or two sentences, however sketchy, to indicate to yourself what should go there. Ignore style, tone, quality, etc., as before, but force yourself to always write complete sentences.

C. Keep repeating 1-3 until there are no holes.

At this point, your content is reasonably well defined. You may recognize locations where a diagram is needed, or a table, chart, quotation, or supporting material. But now it's time to turn your attention on the overall structure of the piece. If you're sure there isn't any significant material missing, the next Phase will reveal a beautiful logical structure for all your work so far.

Phase 5 — Headings

Now we're going to identify the logical sections of your work, and give them all suitable headings so future readers can easily follow your logic—even if you haven't been thinking about logic at all so far.

A. Check for headings.

Go over the whole piece, and see if any sentences would make good headings, or titles, for the ideas that follow. If so, indent everything under them, or make them bold, or otherwise **visually promote them to heading status**.

Note that these headings are still sentences. For most of the project, headings should always be sentences. For this writing method, just assume that **phrases are vague and distracting.**

Sentences assert what you are trying to say. Don't use phrases.

B. Check for sections without headings.

Just as some sentences turned out to be headings, note that there are probably some sentences that *need* headings because they belong to some undefined section. Write heading sentences for these.

C. Check for missing sections.

Read through the headings in sequence. You'll probably notice a few places where there obviously should be a heading, because there's a gap in the logic. If there's no section yet, write the heading first. Probably a sentence will come immediately, to elaborate on the heading. If so, write it.

This the first time you've been asked to write anything specific!

D. Select your Main Points.

Some of your headings are by now obviously the main points you're trying to get across. Promote these sentence-headings and treat them as the key ideas of the whole piece.

E. Read just the Main Points.

If you've organized the Main Points logically, these headings will sound right, and each one will sensibly connect to the next. Skip the subordinate headings for now, and make sure your top-level organization is working. If some important point is missing, write it.

F. Read all the points and headings.

Since they are all sentences, they should read like a summary of the whole piece. It should be pretty clear whether the piece is complete, or whether anything is missing or requires elaboration. You may also find that some points or headings don't belong in this piece.

Phase 6 — Read Out Loud

A. Now you've got something.

It may not be pretty or stylish, but it might have nearly all the basic ideas you want to express. To find out, read it out loud, as if you had a real audience of intelligent people listening to you.

Reading aloud, even if there's nobody to hear you but yourself, forces your brain to take the

content more seriously. When you read aloud something that doesn't make sense, it will be much more obvious. Reading silently allows us to just skip over things, while reading aloud is a kind of commitment to giving every point an equal emphasis. Reading aloud affords a more objective view of your work, because it places you in the imagined audience. (Reading aloud to specific people is also valuable, because it affords insight into how they will respond.)

B. As you read it aloud, ideas will come.

You'll probably notice that there are still holes in the flow of ideas. Some background is missing. A conclusion isn't supported. An important idea is buried three indents in from the previous main point, but really deserves to be a main point itself. A section is no longer relevant and should be deleted.

C. Read aloud again and again — and refine.

After fixing your discoveries from the last step, read aloud again, and repeat until your attention goes mainly onto the style, the flow, the tone, the grammar, and other aspects of presentation. At this point, it's time for some attention on style editing.

Phase 7 — Refine the Style

A. Polish the Main Points.

Check the flow of ideas by making sure all the Main Points are in the right place.

B. Polish the headings.

Make sure the sub-headings are also in the right place and have appropriate main points above them. These sub-headings will help you develop what's needed in the following text. They will also reveal whether the following text is on the topic of the heading.

C. Make your sentences smooth.

If the sentences are too short and choppy (hopefully, they did start out that way), then allow a little descriptive language to flow into them. But recognize that stylistic polish can go on forever, and try to stop when it's just "good enough." You'll be able to do a "final polish" after all the content-creation is really finished.

D. Check for correct grammar.

Get help if you need it, but don't worry about grammar you don't know for sure. Don't

obsess on grammar: that's what editors are for. (If there won't be an editor, then try to get someone more literate than you to give it a read.) Good grammar goes unnoticed, but grammatical mistakes can undermine your credibility.

E. Check your facts.

Check for missing information. Check for points that are over-developed or under-developed. Check for factual accuracy (names, dates, etc.).

F. Decide if it's ready to send out for review.

If not, keep polishing until it is. Do this even if it's not destined for review.

G. Read it aloud again.

See if you're fully convinced it's ready.

Phase 8 — Get a Second Opinion

This step is, of course, only possible under ideal circumstances, but it's highly recommended. We tend to think a piece of writing is done before it really is as good as it should be. It's usually worth taking steps to make sure it is.

A. Send it to someone you respect.

You'll get useful ideas from someone who knows you, and who will give you honest but friendly feedback. Listen closely to their reactions. You don't have to implement any of their suggestions, but try to understand why they respond the way they do. If your reader just says "It's great!" try to find another, more critical reader. Or, perhaps it already *is* great...

B. Get a third opinion.

For contrast, try to find someone who knows the subject area but might not be a friend or acquaintance. This can lead to some very important new thinking.

C. Read it aloud one last time.

Is it finished? It's done, right? It couldn't possibly get any better, right?

Sadly, these questions almost never get a definitive answer. But at least you have something well organized, clearly presented, reviewed, and ready for action.

Advanced Organization

If your writing project is large and its internal structure has become fairly complex, the following is an advanced approach for tightening up the logical flow and ensuring that the content is complete. This approach expands the use of headings to formalize the reasoning and provide the reader with an integrated summary of the paper's thinking process.

Headings as Assertions

We've already strongly recommended that headings be framed as sentences, that is, as assertions of what amounts to your main point at that location in the document. If we take that a step further, we can work to ensure that all the headings do in fact comprise all necessary steps in the logical progression of your thesis. The goal here is to make sure that the sequence of top-level headings can serve as an outline of the steps of logic that present your ideas. If done with sufficient care, this can result in a series of headings that serve as a complete outline of your argument.

Headings as Structure

If this approach is followed, it should become very clear where certain steps in your reasoning are missing, or redundant, or in the wrong order. This is the same general process we recommended in Phase 5 (Headings), but taken further and given a more formal role in the structure of your paper.

Double-Header Headings

This is the difficult part, but it can result in a wonderfully cogent paper that will never confuse a reader and can be exceptionally powerful. The essence of double-header headings is that main headings—the ones that carry the sequence of main points—come in pairs. The first heading is an abstract statement of the main point itself, and the second one is a more specific elucidation of that point, perhaps even an example of the main point at work. For example, the following double-header might be used to introduce this section you're reading right now:

Double-Headings Focus the Reader's Attention on the Logic:
State the Principle, then Show How It Works

If the reader skims through the paper, just reading the first line of each double-header, they will get a clear picture of all your main points, in logical order, and may not even need to read the full text. If readers pay attention to the second line of the double-headers, each main point will be driven home with a succinct dash of specifics. This combination of principle and example, theory and application, can make every point abundantly clear.

Perhaps the most significant benefit of going to the trouble of framing good double-headers is their effect on the text that follows. If the headings are "correct," that is, if they really do summarize the logical flow of your argument, then the text that immediately follows each heading must directly address the point of the heading itself. With double-headers, it becomes painfully obvious if the following text is off-topic, redundant, ineffectual, or unclear. The double-headers, much more than ordinary one-line assertion headings, dictate almost exactly what specific elaboration and discussion must follow.

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