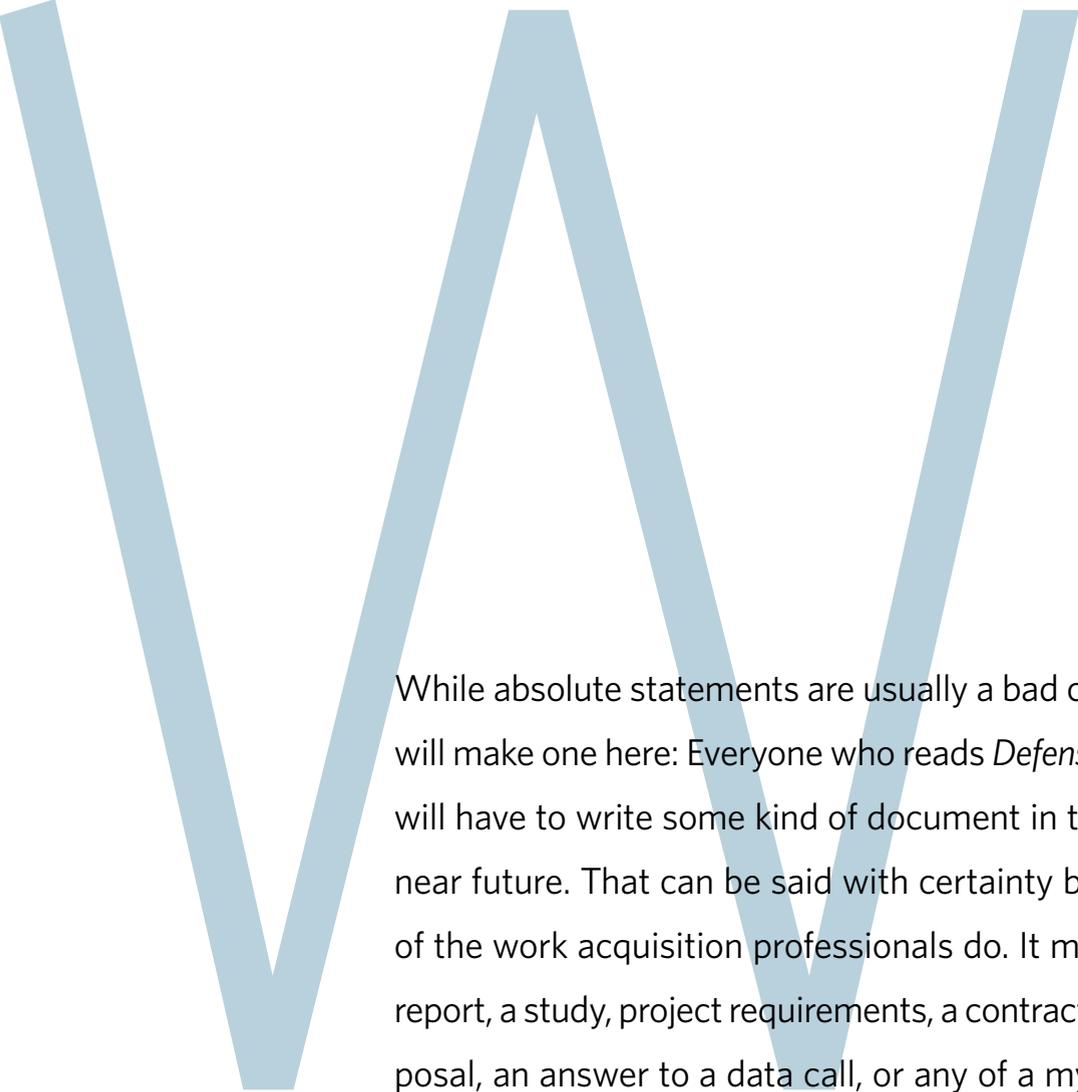


# Surviving Written Communication

*Wayne Turk*



While absolute statements are usually a bad choice, I will make one here: Everyone who reads *Defense AT&L* will have to write some kind of document in the very near future. That can be said with certainty because of the work acquisition professionals do. It may be a report, a study, project requirements, a contract, a proposal, an answer to a data call, or any of a myriad of other documents. It could even be an e-mail (although you probably write many of those each day). I'll ignore e-mails for this article, but they should be professional, and many of the rules I'm going to discuss in this article apply. No matter what the document, to be successful, work products need to be written well.

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In today's government-related work world, the ability to communicate effectively in writing is a critical survival skill. If you can't write, in many cases, slick verbal skills, technical knowledge, or other talents will only take you so far.

What follow are some suggestions on how to improve your writing. The tips are not comprehensive, but they can help.

### The Written Word

You don't have to be the world's greatest writer, but you do need to be able to put words on paper in a way that is readable, grammatically correct, and gets the idea or point across. The ability to write well is a highly valued skill. Surprisingly few people can do it any better than adequately (and many can't even do that—or maybe they are just not willing to take the time or make the effort). A well-written proposal, report, technical document, request for resources, or some other document will get you

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noticed and may put you in demand. Managers at every level are looking for people who can write well. While the written word is only one aspect of communication, it's the one that leaves a permanent record.

Even if you don't write documents, you may have to edit them. At the managerial level, you will be responsible for the content, format, and readability of any written material that is a product of your people.

Documents that are readable, understandable, and accurate are always needed in our field and any other area of endeavor. Content is, or should be, critical; but sometimes grammar, spelling, format, and readability are seen to be almost as, and sometimes more, important. So however good the content, sloppy can quickly detract from content. Accuracy in what you write is crucial. Get the point across concisely, accurately, and understandably so that the right outcomes happen—this could be a decision, funding, schedule extension, or just acceptance of the document by the powers that be. Good writing is a skill that will pay handsome dividends.

### Practical and Specific Suggestions on Good Writing

Much of the following is based on suggestions in "How to Write Right," an article by Gerald Blair, a professor at

Edinburgh University. Although his article was directed at engineers, most of his suggestions are appropriate and applicable for everyone and for any writing task. According to Blair, when you approach a professional writing task, you need to follow a very simple procedure:

- Establish the aim or goal
- Consider the reader
- Devise the structure
- Draft the text
- Edit and revise.

Start with your aim or goal. Every document should have a single aim—a specific reason for being written. Once you have established your goal, decide what information is necessary to meet it. Apply your knowledge to determine the relevant facts for the document and present them precisely and concisely. When you are writing some documents, you may have to present background, explanations, and justifications along with the pertinent facts. Just leave out the gobbledygook and the irrelevant information.

Every document should tell somebody something. As the writer, you have to decide what to tell and how best to tell it to your intended audience. Who will be the reader? Blair says that there are three considerations:

- What they already know affects what you can leave out.
- What they need to know determines what you include.
- What they want to know suggests the order and emphasis of your writing.

Let's look at a business world example. In a proposal for a new product, different departments need different information. Marketing would want to see the product's differentiation and niche in the marketplace; finance would be interested in projected development costs, profit margins, and risk analysis; and research and development would want the requirements and the technical details. To be most effective, you might need to produce three different reports for the three different audiences; however, most of us would prepare a single document, but with sections applying to the specific needs of the different readers.

Structure is used to present the information in such a way that the reader can find and understand the information

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he needs. It is a good idea to provide information in small, manageable chunks, and to use the structure of the document to maintain the context. Divide the document into sections that can be written and read separately. Similarly, those sections can be broken down into subsections.

Blair says that every paragraph in your document should serve a purpose or be removed. A paragraph should convey a single idea. There should be a statement of that key idea (remember the term “topic sentence” from when you were in school?) and additional information such as:

- Development of the idea
- An explanation or analogy
- An illustration
- Support or evidence
- Contextual links to reinforce the structure.



After you have decided what to say, who the intended reader is, and the structure, write the text and then check it for clarity and effectiveness. After you check it, have someone else read it too. The time that spent ensuring that the document is readable and understandable will be worth it. Many companies and organizations require at least two sets of eyes to see every document before it is deemed final. That ensures a higher-quality document, assuming that the second set of eyes actually reads the document and is smart enough and willing to point out flaws.

### A Few Examples of Bad Writing

The following are examples of bad punctuation, word choice, grammar, or some other error that changes or hides the real message. This is what can happen if you don't look over what you wrote and have someone else read it, too. These all were first reprinted in *The New Yorker*.

- “I would not ever want to say there are not people on our campus that at first in the classroom are not hard to understand, at least until students get used to them,” Watkins said. [From the *Bloomington Pantagraph*]
- “This is the first time there has been institutional support,” said Martin Levinson, the director of the drug prevention program in District 30 in Queens. “For the morale of the drug workers, it is a shot in the arm.” [From *The New York Times*]

- “Teaching is like a disease; those of you who have it are lucky, you are blessed,” Honig said. [From the *Stockton Record*]
- Lady wants ride to South Western Pennsylvania. Will more than share expenses. [Advertisement in *Cocoa Today*]
- Like the family barn, Harold Wright's car is still going strong after 285,000 miles. [Photo caption in the *Burlington Free Press*]
- Excellent skills in written communication is required. [Advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune*]
- Eradication Fails To Slow Fire Ants [Headline in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*].

### Writing for Success

To survive and prosper in the workplace you have to communicate well. You have to be able to get your points across to others concisely and effectively. You need to be able to do it in writing as well as verbally. Being able to write well makes you more visible to those above you and more desirable as an employee and as a manager. It will help you toward success in your work and progress in your career. Not being able to write effectively can put barriers in the way of organizational and personal success. And success is something that we are all looking for.

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