

Comms For Good | Let's Write Better, Starting Now

This book will cover basic techniques and hacks that you can use to become a *better writer and editor*. This will help you crystallise your thoughts into words that will appeal to your choice of audience. This book is primarily intended for those handling communications, but it will be useful for just about anyone who wants to write better. Think of this as a *beginner's guide to good writing*.

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Credits

Forever grateful to **aikyam** and **Shemeer** for lending me the space to share my thoughts, and inspiring me to do better. Much thanks to **Jinso** and **Megha**, for guiding me through all the technical bits and being so patient with all my doubts. Thank you, **Anjani**, for making sure **aikyam space** is always an awesome place to work out of.

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Introduction

We think of great writing in English, especially of writing that revolves around social change and commentary, and we think of writers like [B R Ambedkar](#), [Arundhati Roy](#) and [William Dalrymple](#). Writing that is bold and incisive, and has both clarity and vision. And most of us shy away from even setting pen to paper (metaphorically). Because if we cannot write well, why write at all? Right? **Wrong!**

We all have stories to tell. And **writing is a tool we can use to share these stories**. Every one of us can get better at the craft of writing by simple, old-fashioned practice. Let's say we start today and keep at it for a year. We will obviously be much better writers a year later than we are today. Pretty much like anything else, *writing is a craft*, a skill that can be honed. I am not arguing here that talent is nothing. But someone who practises diligently is way ahead compared to the gifted person who does not put in any practice.

It is just as important to *get good at editing* as we are at writing. Maybe, even better. At least once a day, I remember the words of one of my mentors, [V S Jayaschandran](#), from my days as a 20-something trainee in a large newsroom. He would hand us our edited copies and tell us, sometimes sardonically, "There are no great writers, only great editors." Not a statement that was taken lightly at an ego-ridden place like a news desk.

As I grew as a writer, I began to understand what he meant. He was not referring to the superiority of editors over writers. Rather, he was talking about how the writer should learn to approach their work from the eyes of an editor. An objective pair of eyes makes all the difference. In fact, most times, this is actually what separates good writing from great, memorable writing.

To better emphasise the need for good editing, here's a quote from one of the wittiest of writers.

"Substitute 'damn' every time you're inclined to write 'very'; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be." - Mark Twain

How will this book help you become better writers?

This is not a book about language or writing styles or grammar (Ok, there is a teeny bit of grammar, but we'll keep it fun!). What this book will help you with is in thinking through ideas, structuring them, putting your thoughts in order and creating better stories. There are tips and hacks, a little bit of explanation about each, and also suggest ways in which it can be put into practice. Wherever possible, I have also included exercises that you can try out.

All of this helps, if you are actually willing to put in a little time each day towards writing. Maybe *20 minutes a day* is all you can give. You can use the tips in this book to make the best use of those 20 minutes of writing. Happy writing!

“A word after a word after a word is power.” - Margaret Atwood



Before You Start Writing

1. *Know Your Audience*

Who are you writing this blog post/report/article for? Knowing your reader helps you with deciding a number of factors, from the language to be used to the extent of detail you need to add.

2. *Research, Research, Research*

Read up. Talk to people who have personal/working knowledge of the subject. Knowing your topic well makes a huge difference in the kind of storytelling you are doing. Even if it is a personal anecdote, it will be good to do enough research so that you can add links for anything that needs extra reading or is of special interest.

3. *Write Your Synopsis*

This is your **guiding light** and your **anchor**. Every time you are stuck for content, this is what you need to return to, for inspiration. If you are not sure whether your article/blog reads right, return to this synopsis and you will get an idea of what needs to be set right.

Synopsis

noun syn·op·sis \sə-ˈnäp-səs\

a short description of the most important information about something : a summary or outline

1. Keep your synopsis short, not more than *100-150 words*.
2. You can do a *bullet-point* style synopsis, if that helps you think better.
3. Cover the following points in the synopsis: **who** you are writing for, **what** they will take away from this piece (do you want them to learn something/take action?), the

broad idea of what you are trying to cover and all the **important points** you need to touch upon within this topic.

Here is an exercise for you:

Think of a topic that you want to write about, in a blog post of about 300-400 words. This can be about a program you attended, an interesting book you read, a conversation that made you think, a wonderful person that you met, the last good movie you watched...

Anything works.

Create a **100-word synopsis** about this topic.



Just Write!

The first commandment of good writing is... to just *write*! Yep, there is no process to go through, no courses to get through, no moment of inspiration that will strike you all of a sudden. The important thing to remember here is that you are getting your thoughts out of your head and onto a paper or a document. This is the first and most important step.

Now, let's look at some steps to structure your writing better.

1. Put everything in your first draft.

Do **not** edit while writing your first draft. Put all your thoughts on the topic down.

2. Try *this hack* for structuring your content.

Write **blocks of content**, of one paragraph each, on each of the points you want to elaborate upon. **Number** these paragraphs 1, 2, 3, etc. You can then **move these blocks around** to create a visual structure of how you want your content to flow.

“ **Here is a real-life example of how Nobel Prize-winning author Kazuo Ishiguro uses this technique in his writing:** I have two desks. One has a writing slope and the other has a computer on it. The computer dates from 1996. It's not connected to the Internet. I prefer to work by pen on my writing slope for the initial drafts. I want it to be more or less illegible to anyone apart from myself. The rough draft is a big mess. I pay no attention to anything to do with style or coherence. I just need to get everything down on paper. If I'm suddenly struck by a new idea that doesn't fit with what's gone before, I'll still put it in. I just make a note to go back and sort it all out later. Then I plan the whole thing out from that. I number sections and move them around. By the time I write my next draft, I have a clearer idea of where I'm going. This time round, I write much more carefully. . . . I rarely go beyond the third draft. Having said that, there are individual passages that I've had

to write over and over again. —from an interview with *The Paris Review*

3. One **common writing block** that people run into

I wrote 100 words, and don't know what more to add! What you need is a few questions you can answer to fill out those blank spaces. What questions, you ask.

If you are stuck and cannot think, or if you just want to save some time, generative AI can come to your rescue. Ask an AI tool like Gemini or ChatGPT to give you questions to write a better article/blog post. Make your prompt as detailed as you can.

For instance, if I were to ask Gemini to help me out with questions with building a blog post on good writing for non-profits, this is the prompt I would use:

“ I am writing a blog post on good writing hacks and techniques. This blog post is primarily intended for those working in communications in the non-profit sector, but may also include change makers and others who do not have an inclination for, or any training, in writing. Please help me with a set of questions to structure this post better.

Here is the response Gemini gave me:

Questions to Structure Your Blog Post on Good Writing Hacks and Techniques

Here are some questions to help you structure your blog post and ensure it provides valuable insights for non-profit communicators and change makers:

Understanding Your Audience

- Who is your target audience? (e.g., non-profit professionals, volunteers, donors)
- What are their writing challenges or goals? (e.g., crafting compelling grant proposals, writing engaging social media posts)

Essential Writing Principles

- What are the fundamental principles of good writing? (e.g., clarity, conciseness, coherence)
- How can these principles be applied to non-profit writing?

Practical Tips and Techniques

- What are some practical tips for improving writing skills? (e.g., active vs. passive voice, avoiding jargon, using strong verbs)
- How can these techniques be used to enhance the impact of non-profit communications?

Specific Writing Scenarios

- What are common writing scenarios in the non-profit sector? (e.g., press releases, newsletters, grant proposals)
- What specific tips or techniques can be applied to these scenarios?

Storytelling and Engagement

- How can storytelling be used to connect with audiences and drive action?
- What are effective techniques for creating engaging content?

Tools and Resources

- What are some helpful writing tools or resources? (e.g., style guides, online writing courses)
- How can these resources be used to improve writing skills?

Overcoming Writer's Block

- What are common causes of writer's block?
- How can writers overcome writer's block and keep their creativity flowing?

Examples and Case Studies

- Can you provide examples of effective non-profit writing?
- What can readers learn from these examples?

By addressing these questions, you can create a comprehensive and informative blog post that empowers non-profit communicators and change makers to improve their writing skills and achieve their goals.

As you can see, this has given me input to build not one, but multiple blog posts, if needed.

4. If you are writing in English, use active voice as much as possible.

It suggests action and keeps the reader engaged.

Active Voice:

- The subject of the sentence *does* the action.
- Example: "The dog chased the cat."

Passive Voice:

- The subject of the sentence *receives* the action.
- Example: "The cat was chased by the dog."

Why is active voice generally preferred?

- It's clearer and more direct.
- It often makes your writing more engaging.

When might you use passive voice?

- When you don't know who did the action.
- When you want to emphasize the object of the action.

Active voice	Passive voice
She is singing a song.	A song is being sung by her.
K is walking a dog.	A dog is being walked by K.
B cooked tonight's dinner.	Tonight's dinner was cooked by B.

Remember: Try to use active voice most of the time, but don't be afraid to use passive voice when it's appropriate. When in doubt, stick to active voice. You can use a tool like [hemingwayapp](#) to help you figure out if your sentences are in active/passive voice if you find it difficult to figure it out yourself.

5. Don't write run-on sentences.

These are long and confusing for readers.

Here's an example of a long, run-on sentence:

The cat, which was chasing the mouse, suddenly stopped and looked behind it, startled by the loud noise that was coming from the kitchen, where the dog had knocked over a bowl of food, which was now scattered all over the floor, attracting the attention of the flies that were buzzing around the window.

What can you do: Break it down into smaller sentences.

The cat, which was chasing the mouse, suddenly stopped. It was startled by the loud noise coming from the kitchen. The dog had knocked over a bowl of food. The food was now scattered all over the floor, attracting a lot of flies that were now buzzing around the window.

6. Don't use sentence fragments.

A sentence is like a complete thought. It needs a beginning, middle, and end to make sense.

A sentence fragment is like a piece of a thought. It's missing something important, so it doesn't make full sense on its own.

Here's an example:

- **Complete sentence:** The cat chased the mouse.
- **Fragment:** Chased the mouse.

In the second example, "Chased the mouse" is missing the beginning part that tells us who chased the mouse. So, it's a fragment.

Here's an example of sentence fragments contributing to bad writing:

The book was boring. No plot. Uninteresting characters. Didn't finish it.

While these fragments convey the message, they feel choppy and incomplete. Combining them into longer, more complex sentences can improve the flow and coherence of the writing.

Let's make this read better.

The book was so boring that I didn't finish it. There was no compelling plot and the characters were uninteresting.

7. Of sentences & paragraphs

Every sentence has to be a *complete thought*, and has to lead to the next sentence.

Each paragraph has to be a *complete idea*; it can have **as many sentences as needed** to convey that idea. Each paragraph also needs to lead to the next.

Use **subheadings** to club ideas together, and to indicate a change to another idea/topic in the piece.

8. Ready to step up your writing a notch?

Let's look at the next step to writing in a way that people want to keep reading. The human brain is easily bored. It does not want to keep looking at large chunks of text. You need to keep it engaged. And curious about what's coming next. One of the best ways you can do this is quite simple: *vary the length of the sentences in a paragraph*.

For example, just take a look at the paragraph above.

9. You can apply the same principle to paragraphs.

Use long, not-so-long and short paragraphs to create a nice rhythm for the reader.

Here's an example:

The cat sat on the windowsill, watching the birds flit from tree to tree. It was a sunny day, and the warmth of the sun felt good on its fur. The cat yawned and stretched, its claws digging into the soft cushion beneath it.

Suddenly, a small bird landed on the branch of a nearby tree. The cat's eyes narrowed. It crouched low, its muscles tense. The bird chirped nervously.

The cat pounced. The bird squawked and flapped its wings, but it was too late. The cat had caught it.

The cat sat proudly on the windowsill, its prey clutched in its claws. It had successfully

hunted down the bird, demonstrating its natural instincts and agility. The sun continued to shine, casting a warm glow on the scene. The cat's eyes, however, were focused on its prize, a small, feathered creature that would soon become its meal.

10. Inviting Titles, Crisp Intros

Titles should pull the reader into the story. These are best kept short and simple; try not to use big words. A good headline is ideally not more than 7-8 words (60-70 character). If this seems like a hard ask, you can always write an honest headline which gives the reader an idea of what you have written without telling the whole story.

Here are some examples:

Short and Simple:

- New Initiative Launched
- Volunteers Needed

Teasing and Intriguing:

- Can One Person Make a Difference?
- The Secret to Fundraising, Solved
- Is This the End of Migrant Issues?

Honest and Informative:

- [Climate Action | It's Time to Do Your Bit for The Planet](#)
- [Creating New Generations of Tinkerers](#)
- [Enabling Better Digital Literacy](#)

These are just examples. The best headline for your content will depend on the specific topic and the message you want to convey.

Let's try this exercise:

Remember the topic you picked in the last chapter, and wrote a synopsis for?

Let's write a **300-400 word blog post** on that topic. Every time you feel stuck or confused, go back to your synopsis for guidance.



Creating Content for Your Organisation

As a changemaker, your content should inspire, educate, and motivate others to join your cause. They can join your cause in various ways, like donating to your cause, volunteering, joining your team, etc. Here are some things to think through for creating effective content for your blogs and social media:

1. Know Your Audience

- **Identify your target audience:** Who are you trying to reach? What are their interests, values, and pain points?
- **Tailor your content:** Create content that your audience is looking for and addresses their needs.

2. Define Your Message

- **What is your mission?** Clearly articulate your cause and the impact you want to make.
- **What is your unique selling point?** What sets your cause apart from others?
- **What is your call to action?** What do you want your audience to do after consuming your content?

3. Choose the Right Format

- **Blogs:** Ideal for in-depth discussions, sharing research, and providing step-by-step guides.
- **Social media:** Great for quick updates, sharing visuals, and engaging with your audience.
- **Videos:** Can be powerful for storytelling, demonstrations, and testimonials.
- **Podcasts:** Offer a more intimate way to connect with your audience and share your message.

4. Tell Compelling Stories

- **Personal anecdotes:** Share your own experiences and the stories of others to connect with your audience on an emotional level.
- **Case studies:** Showcase the impact of your work through real-world examples.
- **Behind-the-scenes glimpses:** Give your audience a peek into your organization's operations and the challenges you face.
- **Conversations/Interviews:** These can be with people working on your cause, people benefiting from your organisation, funders and the like.

5. Use Visuals

- **Images:** Use high-quality images that are relevant to your content and visually appealing.
- **Infographics:** Break down complex information into easy-to-understand visuals.
- **Videos:** Create engaging videos that capture your audience's attention.

6. Optimise for Search Engines

- **Keywords:** Use relevant keywords throughout your content to improve your search engine ranking. Keywords are words or phrases that users type into search engines to find relevant content for their queries. Think of what your user would type into a search bar to find an organisation like yours.
- **Meta descriptions:** Write compelling meta descriptions that entice users to click on your content. A meta description is a short summary of a page's content that appears on search engine results pages. Think of them as an intro to your reader, telling them exactly what you have to offer.
- **Backlinks:** Build relationships with other websites in your niche to increase your backlinks. Backlinks are links from other websites to yours. They're like votes of confidence that can help your content rank higher in search engine results.

7. Engage with Your Audience

- **Respond to comments and messages:** Show your audience that you value their input.
- **Ask questions:** Encourage your audience to share their thoughts and experiences.
- **Join relevant online communities:** Participate in discussions and share your content with a wider audience.

This is the first step in creating content that effectively inspires and motivates others to join your cause. Remember, consistency is key, so keep creating and sharing your message.

