Writing for the Year 2000

"Yes, it's hard to write, but it's harder not to."

Carl Van Doren

Education Services

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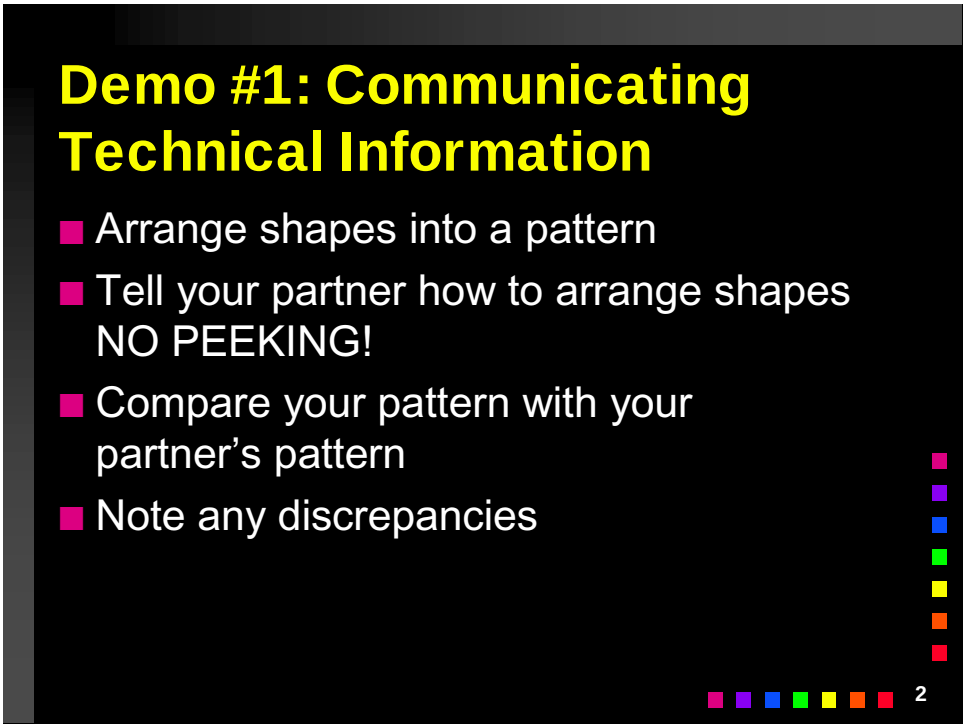
This course will prepare you to:

- Write with an audience and purpose in mind
- Structure information coherently
- Use appropriate tools and language
- Edit your own work



1. Writing with an Audience and Purpose in Mind

Before you begin to write, it is essential that you have a clear idea of where you are going. You need to know who your audience is and what your purpose is in writing for that audience. In this section of the course, you will learn how to determine who will be the "end user" of your writing and why you are writing. This will help you plan what you are going to write and decide what format you will use.

1.1 Analyze Your Audience: Who is the end user?

Picture the Reader

When you talk on the phone, it helps to know the person you are talking to so that you know what to say to that person. In your mind's eye, you develop a picture of that person, and what you say is largely

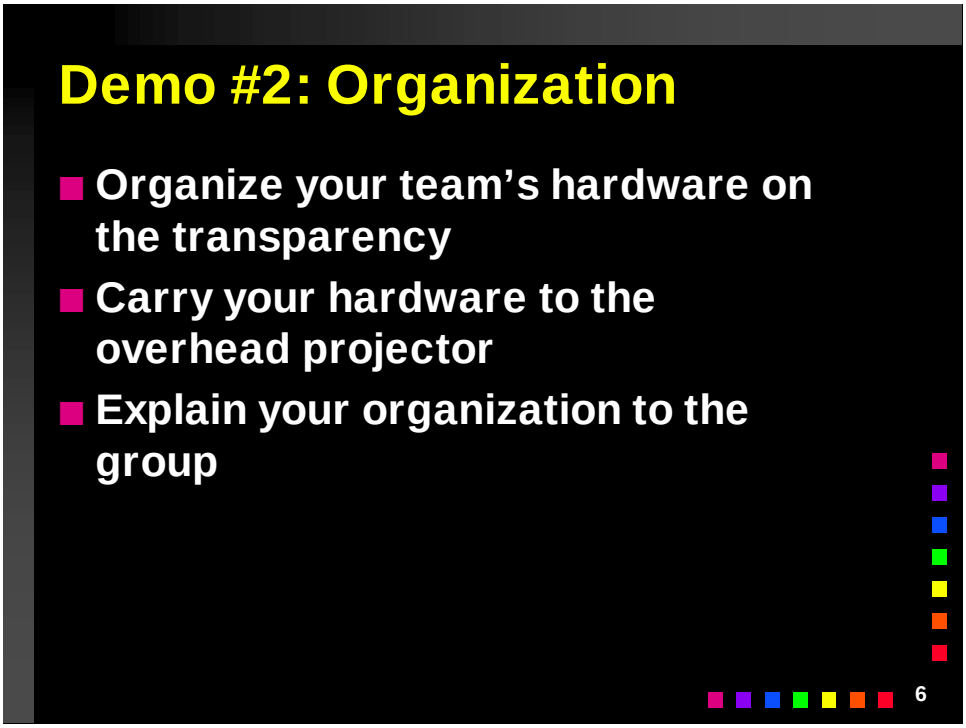
determined by the picture you have in mind. The same thing happens when you write. You picture the reader in your mind as you write, and you "talk" to that person. Some of the people you might picture as you write programming documentation include:

- A colleague at your location
- A colleague at a different location or in a different company
- Operators or administrators of the product you are working on
- End users of the product
- The general public

Each of these audiences will have different experience with the product and different expectations for the documentation. Your job as a writer is to figure out what kind of audience you are writing for so that you can match the technical content of your documentation to your readers' experience and expectations.

Lowest Common Denominator

Most of the time you will be writing for more than one audience. In order to reach the majority of your readers, you need to think of all the possible audiences you may be writing for and choose the *lowest common denominator* in terms of experience and expectations. Before you start writing, picture someone who matches the profile of this lowest common denominator. As you write, imagine that you are talking directly to this person. In this way, you can avoid talking down to, or over the heads of, your intended audience.

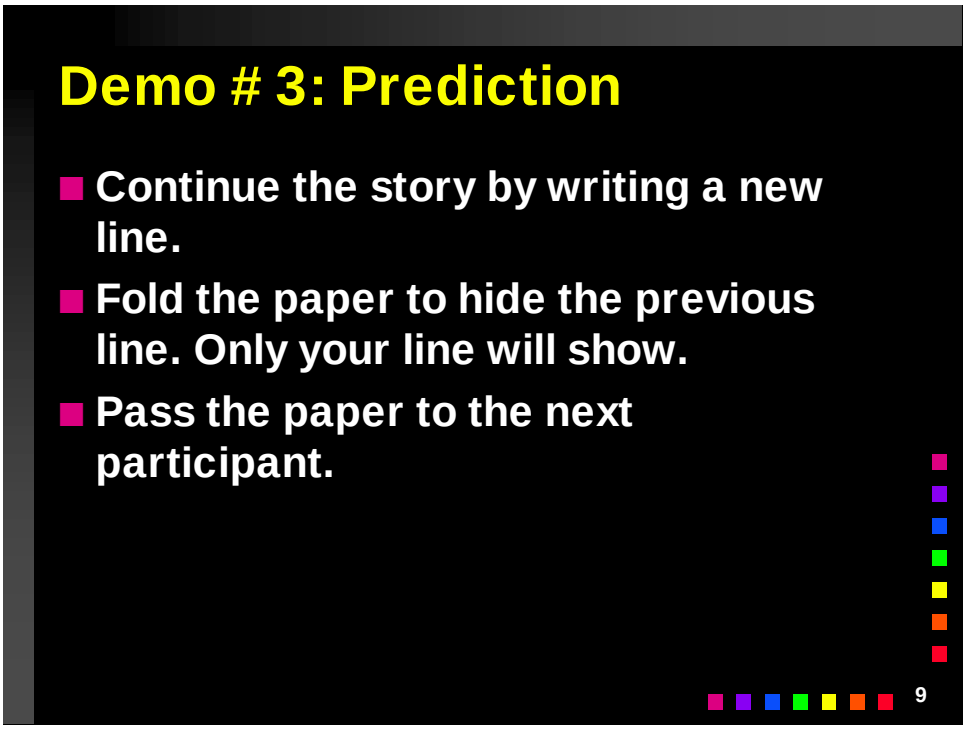


1.2 Determine Your Purpose: Why are you writing?

When we write, we always write with a purpose. When your boss makes you write a report, you write for the purpose of pleasing your boss, if nothing else. In the process of writing that report, you may discover other purposes for writing, such as "making it look like I really have accomplished something" or "accounting for all that time I spent surfing the Web," but the main reason you are writing the report is to persuade your boss that you are doing a good job. One of the main purposes for writing reports is to persuade. Other purposes include:

- To describe what you've done
- To propose a change
- To explain how to use something

Identifying a single purpose and sticking to it is essential to good writing. A report that starts out explaining how to use a product and ends up proposing a change to the product confuses the reader. Once you have your audience in mind, you will need to determine a single purpose for writing. As you write, remind yourself of that purpose to avoid getting side tracked.



1.3 Choose a Format: What kind of document are you going to write?

Once you know who you are writing for and why, you are ready to choose the format of the document you are about to write. Types of documents you might want to choose from include:

- Memos
- Letters

- Reports
- Plans and proposals
- Programmer's comments
- Programmer/administrator documentation

Memos are generally used for informal internal communication, while letters are more formal and suitable for correspondence with people outside the company or the immediate location. Reports can be anything from informal short status reports you might send to your supervisor to illustrated annual reports printed in expensive color booklets. Plans and proposals are similar to reports, except that they look forward to what might happen in the future, while reports tend to describe past and present activities.

Exercise 1.1: Writing for an Audience

Instructions: Check the box beside each audience for which you would imagine writing each type of document listed below.

Example:

- Programmer/Administrator Guide
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, same location _____
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, unknown location _____
  - ❑ Management/marketing, same location _____
  - ☑ Product administrator/operator _____

For what audience would *you* write a:

- Memo
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, same location _____
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, unknown location _____
  - ❑ Management/marketing, same location _____
  - ❑ Product administrator/operator _____
- Business letter
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, same location _____
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, unknown location _____
  - ❑ Management/marketing, same location _____
  - ❑ Product administrator/operator _____
- Report
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, same location _____
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, unknown location _____
  - ❑ Management/marketing, same location _____
  - ❑ Product administrator/operator _____
- Plan
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, same location _____
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, unknown location _____
  - ❑ Management/marketing, same location _____

- ❑ Product administrator/operator _____

- Programmer's Comment
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, same location _____
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, unknown location _____
  - ❑ Management/marketing, same location _____
  - ❑ Product administrator/operator _____

Exercise 1.2: Writing for a Purpose

Instructions: Beside each audience you have checked above, write down the purpose for which you would imagine writing that type of document for that audience.

Example:

- Programmer/Administrator Guide
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, same location _____
  - ❑ Colleague/peer, unknown location _____
  - ❑ Management/marketing, same location _____
  - ☑ Product administrator/operator _*Explain how to use something*

2. Getting Organized Before You Write

When we read, we expect the author to follow certain rules of organization, often without being conscious of these rules ourselves. We expect the author to begin each sentence with a capital letter, to break up long passages into paragraphs, and to use punctuation as we are used to seeing it used. More importantly, we expect the author to arrange the information contained in the text in what we consider to be a logical manner, an arrangement we have come to expect from our experience reading other writers. When a writer fails to meet our expectations, we may become confused, frustrated or annoyed, and we are likely to give up on reading the text altogether.

When you write, you must meet the reader's expectations to effectively communicate your meaning. This is more important in written communication than in spoken communication because the reader has no opportunity to ask the writer to repeat the information in a different way. One way to meet the reader's expectations with regard to organization is to create an outline before you write, and to follow that outline as you write.

2.1 Outline: What are you going to include?

Before you write anything, it is always a good idea to jot down a list of things you want to write about. As you look over this list, specific topics you want to cover begin to take shape. By adding a little action to the topics you have identified, you can turn your topics into topic sentences. And if you add a short list of supporting ideas under each topic sentence, before you know it you will have created an outline that will help to guide you as you write.

Make a list of topics

Jot down a list of things you might want to write about. Write them down as they come to you, in any order. You can change the order later. And this list should only contain *things* (nouns). Do not worry about what you are going to say about these things just yet. If you are writing with a word processor, make each list item a separate paragraph. Use the default paragraph style: it is too early to assign heading levels at this point.

Once you have a few items written down, you will begin to see patterns in the way these items relate to each other. Some items occur logically before others; some are included within other items. Try grouping these items together. Your word processor's "drag and drop" feature may come in handy for grouping list items this way. If some items seem to be missing, add the missing items. Blank lines above and below provide an easy-to-see demarcation of the boundaries between groups. If this is a little too linear for your way of thinking, consider grouping your list items on unlined paper in clusters or patterns of your own choosing. You might even consider writing your items on yellow "stickies" and arranging them on a white board or table top. In order to group your list items, you must recognize a common theme among them. Be sure to include an item that identifies this central theme, or *topic*, if it is not already listed.

Once you have your list items grouped, arrange them in relation to each other. What comes first? Which items are more general or more important than the others? Put these items in a prominent place in each group. Are there any items or groups of items that do not seem to fit in with the rest? If you cannot relocate them, consider eliminating these items or groups. Once you have your groups identified and arranged in order, the structure of what you are going to write begins to take shape.

To make the structure of your groups evident at a glance, arrange the groups in a "stair step" manner, with the topics at the left margin of the page and the items related to that topic indented under the topic. An easy way to accomplish this stair step arrangement is to use your word processor's outline function. Assign the top-level heading style to each topic and a lower-level heading style to each item related to that topic. When you view the document in outline mode, the topics and items will appear in a stair step arrangement.

Example:

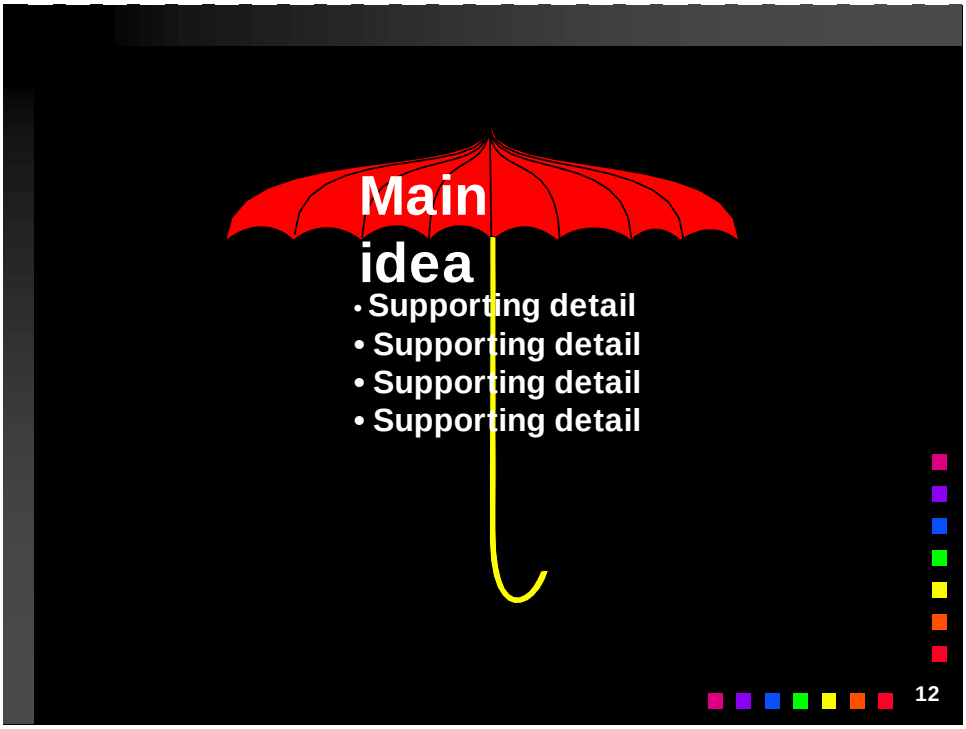
+ Topic 1

– item
– item
– item

+ Topic 2

– item
– item
– item

Identify the main idea



Your ordered list now has the characteristics of a topic outline. Each group has a common theme, or *topic*, and each topic will eventually be developed into a paragraph. But a paragraph does more than just identify a topic. It must express a *main idea* about that topic. The main idea is what the paragraph is all about. Every sentence in the paragraph must be about the topic, and every sentence must support the main idea. Readers expect the information they read to be organized in this way, and one way to make sure that you stick to the main idea is to write it down. A sentence that expresses the main idea of a paragraph is called a *topic sentence*, and an outline that contains these main idea sentences is called a topic sentence outline.

Turn your topics into sentences

Each group of items in your list is now grouped around a central topic, but in order to write about that topic you will need to decide what you want to say about that topic. A topic is an inert *thing*: it is a noun that can serve as the subject or starting point of a sentence, but cannot express a main idea by itself. To be complete, a sentence needs a predicate, a verbal element that expresses an *action* or makes an *assertion*. To add action to your topics, you will need to turn them into complete sentences.

You can start by adding a verb to each of your topics. However, verbs are usually not much good by themselves. Most verbs need an object or a complement before they can say anything about a topic. Once you have added a verb, the necessary object or complement will probably suggest itself naturally. Read the sentence over to see if it really expresses the main idea. You may need to change the object or complement, or you may need to substitute a stronger verb to express the main idea you want to convey.

Turn your topics and topic sentences into an outline

At this point, your outline looks something like this:

+ The topic sentence for topic 1 expresses this main idea.

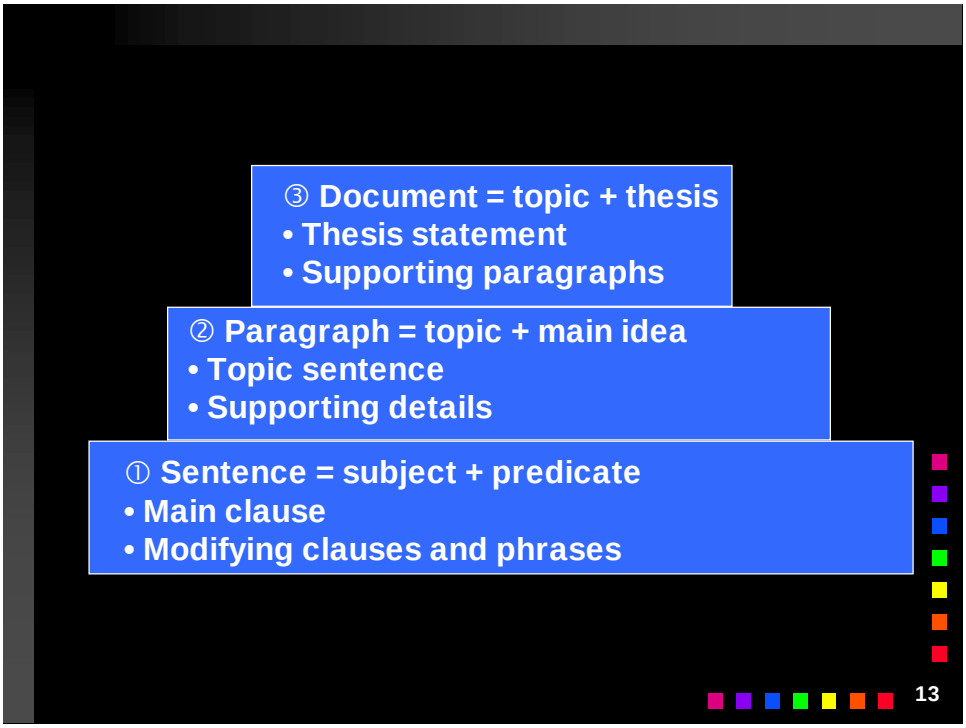
- item
- item
- item

+ The topic sentence for topic 2 expresses this main idea.

- item
- item
- item

The items that appear under your topic sentences represent details that you will use to support each main idea. Check these *supporting details* to make sure that they really support the main idea. Some of your topic sentences may not have any supporting details yet. Take time now to add some supporting details. A good rule of thumb is to add supporting details in groups of two or more. A single supporting detail is seldom enough to support a main idea. On the other hand, a long list of supporting details is a good sign that the topic or the main idea may be too broad: consider breaking it down into two or more groups of topic sentences with supporting details.

Now you have a topic sentence outline with two or more groups containing a topic sentence and supporting details. Each of these groups will be developed into a paragraph when you begin to write. But before you begin to write, take a minute to decide how you will put these topic sentences and supporting details together to form paragraphs.



2.2 Introduction and Conclusion

Effective writing follows this three-part sequence:

1. Tell the reader what you are going to say.
2. Say it.
3. Remind the reader of what you said.

These three parts are formally known as the *introduction*, the *body*, and the *conclusion*. The introduction can be a single sentence, a paragraph, or a group of paragraphs, depending on how long your document is. It provides general information about the content and purpose of your document so that the reader knows what to expect. The body contains all the general and detailed information necessary to achieve the purpose of the document. It usually consists of several paragraphs. The conclusion summarizes how you have achieved the purpose of the document. Like the introduction, it can be a single sentence, a paragraph, or a group of paragraphs.

Once you have prepared a topic sentence outline, you have planned the contents of the body of your document. At this point, it is a good idea to add an introduction and a conclusion to your outline, just to be sure that you do not forget to include them. Planning the introduction and conclusion before you begin writing is also a good test of whether the planned content of your document is consistent with the purpose of the document. You may find it necessary to go back and change the body to make it consistent with your introduction and conclusion.