
UNIT 1 THE BASICS OF WRITING

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Warm Up
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Understanding How Writing Helps
 - 1.3.1 How Writing Helps
 - 1.3.2 Can Writing be Learned?
- 1.4 Thinking Critically of Your Writing
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Suggested Readings
- 1.7 Answers

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we are making you aware of the reasons why it is necessary to write well. We emphasize how being an effective writer will enable you to develop personally, socially and academically. The steps to writing well are clearly delineated. The importance of revision is emphasized and ways to troubleshoot, proofread and edit are enunciated. Finally, to write well, you must be a reflective person and thinking critically. We have shown you the means to do that.

1.1 WARM UP

- Can you recall your earliest experience of writing? What did you write? Were you encouraged by your parents/ teachers? How did you feel?

- Think of a turning point when your attitude to writing changed? What happened? Why did you change?

- Who has influenced you the most where your writing is concerned? Your teacher? A friend? A family member? Anyone else?

1.2 INTRODUCTION

As students we tend to write all the time—it could be messaging texts on Whatsapp, having our blog where we showcase our ideas or skills, or writing terse messages on Facebook or Twitter. It could also be formal emails applying for jobs, or assignments we have to do and submit to our teachers.

This is our practical need. But learning to write effectively is important for other reasons as well. Why do we think writing is important? Well, writing helps you to think, to be creative yet organized and logical. When you write, and this pertains to any type of writing, you generate ideas and content which you must arrange in systematic ways to be an effective writer. By combining words into phrases and sentences and often joining them with conjunctions, a writer creates complex new ideas. For example, the word and brings out additions to the point, but emphasizes differences and because gives reasons for your ideas. Writing also helps you to reflect on what happened by suggesting solutions to problems, deepens your ability to analyze and synthesize different points of view.

Since we have to write so much and in such diverse forms and modes, why not do this task really well. In this unit we will reflect on the writing process and suggest ways to improve our writing skill.

Check your progress 1

1. Which type of writing do you enjoy most? Why?

2. Which social media do you write on most? Why?

1.3 UNDERSTANDING HOW WRITING HELPS

Let us take a closer look at how practising good writing may help us.

1.3.1 How Writing Helps

As you are probably aware, writing helps you develop many skills which are helpful for your academic life and which will be useful later at your work life – when you have to write letters, reports, proposals, etc.

- Writing helps you remember what you are studying, by helping you to make coherent notes, analyse, synthesize and summarise information from different sources.
- Writing as you read by taking notes, summarizing, responding to assumptions/arguments in a text, makes you a better reader. This kind of reflection enhances your understanding and helps you develop new insights. It helps you become a critical thinker.
- Attempting different kinds of writing contributes to learning in different ways, giving you an awareness of different genres, their possibilities and arrangements. An expository composition helps you organise and present what you have learnt with clarity. You are able to marshal facts and array them in order of importance. A narrative helps you sequence events and highlight the important ones. Arguing a position teaches you not only to support your reasons but also anticipate objections to your arguments and learn to refute them.
- Writing will also foster your personal development. For example, writing about controversial issues will help you examine your basic beliefs. When you write about events in your life and in literature, it helps you understand the significance of these events. In other word, you become a more reflective and thinking person.
- As a student, you are aware of how writing can contribute to success in your academic life, since all academic work involves writing. Finally in your examinations, it is only your reading and writing skill which is assessed. Even your reading comprehension is measured through the writing skill. So, you need to really practice to be a good writer.
- Later on, at the workplace, you will need to use writing to get jobs; while in the job you will be expected to write effective and correctly worded emails, memos, reports, proposals and so on. If your language is faulty or your ideas are ill-organised, it will affect your career-enhancement.

Check your progress 2

1. How does good writing help you in your academic life?

2. How does writing develop you as a person?

1.3.2 Can Writing be Learned?

Many people believe that people who are good at writing do not need to spend a lot of time learning to write – they are born writers. Writing comes naturally to them. However, this is not true. Writing research shows that all good writers also **keep learning** how to write and they constantly practice their skill. So, learning to write is essential to developing the writing skill. What do you need to do in order to be an effective writer?

- i Learn to write by reading: Reading extensively will enable you to become a better writer. All good writers are avid readers who not only read for enjoyment and information, but also to hone their craft.

One of the important ways in which reading helps is, it enables you to understand a particular genre or type of writing. For example, a narrative will follow a certain trajectory which will be very different from an argumentative essay or a persuasive piece.

Although individual texts of a particular genre would be different from each other, they nonetheless will follow a certain pattern that is quite predictable – and these are known as **conventions**. These conventions are broad frameworks and not rigid formulas, so a writer has a lot of flexibility for creativity and inventiveness.

To understand conventions of a certain genre, you need to read examples of that genre so that you can recognize the general pattern as well find room for innovation. For example, you have to understand how a narrative is different from a persuasive piece.

- ii. One of the best ways to become a good writer is by constantly writing. Practice will make your writing more thoughtful and ideational. Fortunately, all of us use social media. Blogging about your experiences or your skills is a great way to improve your writing. You could also keep a journal or a diary of your special moments. This will also help you write continuously, which will help you write better.
- iii. Of course, it is important to ceaselessly enhance your vocabulary, and convert your passive vocabulary into an active one by using news words in your writing. In other words, become ‘word-conscious’ as also a ‘word seeker’.
- iv. It is very important to be aware of the purpose for which you are writing and have knowledge of who your readers are. This will make your writing more focused and precise. Whatever the writing situation, most of us as writers have various purposes in mind. It could be an article for a college magazine or a blog on travel, or about travel and food, and so on. Any piece of writing should always include self-discovery and self-presentation.

Remember, most writing is meant to be read by others. Sometimes the audience is specific as in college essays or job applications. More often the audience is more general, as in an academic assignment in a college course, to be read by the teacher or fellow students.

Let us take an example of writing of an event from your own life. Following this approach about being aware of your readers. These are some of the questions that you could ask yourself when you are writing a narrative piece:

- Who are my readers?
- What are they likely to think of me as they read about this event?
- What do I want them to think of me?
- How much of the event is likely to be familiar to my readers?
- What might surprise them?
- How can I help my readers to understand the significance of this event in my life?
- Does it suggest to the readers the social and cultural forces that shaped me through this event?

- v. The next step is to attempt to understand your subject or topic. Few writers can have a complete understanding of their subject or topic when they begin to write. For most of us, writing is a means of **discovery**, that is, it is a way to learn about the subject, try out the ideas and information you have collected, review them from time to time, explore connections and implication. Remember, ‘writing is not something you do after thinking, but in order to help you to think’ (Axelrod and Cooper, 2012).

Obviously, when you have to write an assignment explaining a concept or an expository piece regarding a topic in your course, you cannot and should not communicate everything about it. A writer must limit the scope of his/her subject. This is again dependent on the purpose, topic and your audience.

An effective writer constructs a reader-friendly plan by dividing the information into clearly distinguishable parts or sub-topics. This gives readers cues or road signs to guide them through your assignment. So, a writer will use some of these building blocks: **defining, classifying or dividing, comparing and contrasting, illustrating** with examples, reporting, explaining **cause and effects**, and so on. Of course, you must only use those building blocks as are required for your assignment. To convince the reader of the trustworthiness/authenticity of your information, you must acknowledge the expert writers that you have consulted.

So how do you explore your subject and gain an overview of it. There are two main ways in which you can do that.

- 1) **Discovering what you already know about the subject.** Consider what you already know about the subject and why you find it interesting. Write quickly, without planning and organizing. Check your class lecture notes first, before you look at other sources.
- 2) **Doing research is essential.** To find comprehensive, updated information of your topic, you should locate it in relevant articles, books, on the internet, etc. Doing an internet search often creates a focus for your assignment. Bookmark websites that appear useful and be sure to include the URL, the title of the site, the date when the information was posted, and the date you accessed it. Similarly, make careful records of the author, title, publication information, page number of the articles, journals and books you refer to. This will help you go back to the sites as well acknowledge them if you make use of them.

After the research where you take copious notes, you come to the writing stage. Most writers do not write out a text as a whole piece, but focus on one thing and then on another. Writing does not progress in a linear, step-by-step fashion; in fact, it proceeds **recursively**. This means that writers return again and again to the ideas that they are trying to clarify, extend or argue.

Writers, therefore, plan and then revise their plan, draft and then revise their drafts, write and then rewrite. This is known as the **process approach to writing** and it is important to follow such an approach:

- a) **Writing a plan:** It is important to write an outline. This may be in points, and remember these points will be changed if required. In fact, your plan must be dynamic and flexible.
- a. **Writing a draft:** While writing a draft, you will benefit from frequent pauses to reread what you have written. Rereading helps you to add an example, choose different words and fill in a gap in the logic of an argument. Rereading leads to substantial rethinking and revising; i.e. cutting, reorganizing, rewriting.
- b) **Conferencing:** Sometimes it may be impossible to discover problems in your own writing – perhaps some ideas are not explained adequately or are not sequenced satisfactorily. There may be mistakes in punctuation, spelling, vocabulary or grammar. For this reason, it may be a good idea to show your draft to others to read. You may consult your teachers, seniors or even classmates.

- c) **Revising:** Review the comments of your friends and teachers and incorporate them if they are reasonable. Check for spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors. See where you can improve your vocabulary or add clarity to your ideas. Then make another draft.

Axelrod and Cooper (2012) have suggested interesting ways to **troubleshoot** your draft. Let's look at the ways we can take a relook at our draft in a meaningful way:

Focus:

- Is the focus too broad, i.e. have I covered too much and a lot of it does not directly relate to my topic?
- Focus is too narrow, i.e. I don't have enough to write about.

Readability:

- Is the organisation logical? Look for a topic sentence in each paragraph and see if there is a fluent flow of ideas.
- Is your beginning interesting for your readers?

Is the ending summarizing the information for the readers and speculating about the future?

Appropriate explanatory strategies:

- Information not getting through clearly to your readers – why?
- More information required about certain aspects of the topic, so you need to do additional research on your essay.
- Definitions need to be worked out better.
- You need to consider adding synonyms and antonyms for terms you are defining.
- You may need to supplement your writing with illustrations and examples.
- Are visuals required – tables, graphs, photographs help to explain your points better.

Good writers mistakenly equate revision with editing and proofreading. As we have seen, it is much more-- and refers to global changes that writers make in the purpose, focus, organisation and development of their writing. Most of this process happens continuously as one writes. Of course, some writers quickly want to write their first draft and go over it bit by bit.

Editing and Proofreading

Assignments which are revised, well edited and proofread always are appreciated. If you are writing by hand, especially, you have to check for punctuation, grammar and spelling mistakes. Using a computer helps you to some extent to prevent gross mistakes but does not help with organization of ideas or style. To develop a flow of ideas and a sense of style you must practice writing and enjoying do so.

Let us look at editing first. Editing deals with surface errors—mistakes in punctuation, spelling, word choice, grammar and sentence sense. A good editor also keeps an eye for clarity, conciseness and emphasis. Let us discuss some tried and tested techniques of editing which you could use on your draft.

- Keep your dictionary and thesaurus handy to check for spelling, usage, meaning of words in doubt and synonyms. If you are working on the laptop, be sure to use these tools.

- Eliminate the common mistakes which all of us make, such as it's/its, lets/let's, who's/whose, and so on.
- Look out for the problem areas in your writing which your teachers have commented on.
- Reading aloud of your drafts also helps as you get to hear what your eye may have missed,
- Some of the grammatical errors you could look out for are: fused sentences, misused past-perfect verbs, order of adjectives, adjective clauses with misplaced commas, and so on.

Proofread your final draft a couple of times. Also check if you have formatted it appropriately and numbered the pages. Be sure to write your name and roll number.

Check your progress 3

1. Why do you think being a good reader can help you become a good writer?

2. What would you do, personally, to be a good writer?

3. Talk about the ways you can enhance your vocabulary.

4. How would you write an essay following the process approach?

1.4 THINKING CRITICALLY OF YOUR WRITING

As we said at the start, reflecting on your own experience, knowledge, reading helps you become a better and more versatile writer. Reflecting enables you to be aware of what you already know and what you still need to learn. Reflecting helps you to be aware of your own thinking process. It will enable you to ask questions about the topic, which genre it belongs to, what is the purpose of writing and who is the reader. This will help you to understand your

writing process creatively and expand your understanding of the genre. We have already discussed this in the first unit of the course.

Check your progress 4

Write about 500 words on occasion when writing helped you accomplish something. Here are possibilities you could think about:

- When your writing made others sit up and notice you
- When your writing helped you get better marks
- An occasion when writing enabled you to express your emotions.
- An occasion when your writing influenced people/someone.
- When you dealt with a personal or academic problem through writing.
(You could use any of these points or use others of your own).

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we made you realize that since you need to write all the time, you must do it effectively and with ease. We also helped you discover how being a good writer would help you in your academic life and later when you join the work force. In fact, if you are a good writer, you are more likely to be a successful student and employee. We also took you through the steps which would enable you to be a good writer and helped you go through the process of writing. We guided you to the questions that you need to ask when you are revising your work. Finally, we emphasized on the fact that to be a good writer you need to be a reflective person with critical thinking abilities.

1.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

Axelrod, Rise B., Cooper R. Charles, (2012) *Concise Guide to Writing*. New York, Bedford/St Martin's.

Wyrick, Jean (2005) *Steps to Writing Well - with Additional Readings*. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth

1.7 ANSWERS

Check your progress 1

Write the answer in your own words.

Check your progress 2

1. How good writing helps you in your academic life:
 - Helps in note-taking, summarizing
 - Understanding different genres and organising material accordingly
(add more points from your experience)
2. How writing develops you as a person:

- Helps you examine your beliefs
 - Enables you to understand the significance of the events in your life.
 - Become a more reflective, thinking person
- (add more points from your own experience)

Check your progress 3

1 How being a good reader can help you become a good writer:

- Can understand different kinds of genres if you read widely
- Understand their patterns
- Enhance your passive vocabulary

2 Open ended.

3 Open ended.

4 Writing an essay following the process approach:

- Finding a purpose
- Exploring your subject
- Understanding your reader
- Writing an outline
- Writing a draft
- Conferencing with others
- Revising using troubleshooting tools
- Proofreading

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