

Writing resources: ENGL 433, Grant Writing

ENGL 433 | Spring 2022 | Bradley Dilger | dilger@purdue.edu | +1-309-259-0328

Preamble

Writing is **difficult**: there's just no way around it. Becoming an effective writer takes a lot of experience and knowledge, and requires both technical, linguistic, personal, and interpersonal skills.

Writing is **discipline-specific**: different fields have their own content, of course, but also genres (the forms that are common in a given field, rhetorics (ways that writers present evidence or share argument), and processes (approaches to developing and delivering writing). For many people, this discipline-specific knowledge is *tacit*: they have this knowledge, but not a language to describe it.

Writing is **thankless**: the labor of writing effectively is invisible, as developing effective writing makes it easily understood and eliminates or reduces error — as expressed by the metaphors of “clarity” often associated with good writing.

Writing is **not valued at Purdue**: though we have the Writing Lab, Purdue has the weakest writing requirements in the Big Ten, and many students never take a writing-intensive class at Purdue.

The techniques and resources here are useful, but they do not promise anyone can read a few things and immediately write well. Anyone who says that's possible is either **very confused** or **lying**. Imagine this guide as identifying ways you can learn to write more effectively over time.

Dilger's best practices

You've probably heard a lot of this before, or read someone else's “[rules of writing](#).” Here are my nine best practices.

1. **Start writing early**, so all the “if possible” below are possible — when you know a writing deadline is approaching, begin thinking about the work necessary to make it. Use calendars and/or do lists to plan your writing, and make good habits like writing nearly every day. (Not every day. Everyone needs a break.)
2. **Read**. Effective writing requires content knowledge, and that comes from reading articles, books, and other forms that share ideas and can serve as models too. Go to the library and browse books and magazines. Use the “also-bot” on online bookstores to find other things to read. And ensure that the style guide best for your profession is on your bookshelf—or better yet, open on your desk.

3. **Scaffold.** The more high-stakes and/or long a project is, the more scaffolding you need: writing that you do to hold up your deliverable, but which is not published. This includes time management documents like calendars and do-lists, but also reflections on your work, summaries that help you focus, and other forms. For grant writing, annotating the RFP and creating checklists to guide your work is essential.
4. **Write and share discovery drafts.** Anne Lamott calls these “[shitty first drafts](#).” One paragraph says it all:

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the *down draft*—you just get it down. The second draft is the *up draft*—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the *dental draft*, where you check every tooth, to see if it’s loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy.

Sharing these drafts—though this can be intimidating—will help you find the best ideas and expressions to move forward. Find reviewers who can help you do this productively.
5. **Draft multiple times and see your drafts in multiple ways.** Lamott speaks of three drafts. Sometimes you only need two. Some documents require six or more drafts of certain sections (the abstract for a grant proposal, for example)—written by different people. But no part of *any* document should be immune from writing, reviewing, re-writing, and editing. Find ways to see drafts differently: change the fonts, margins, and font sizes to literally make the manuscript look different, and review both on screen and hard copy.
6. **Mix computing and hand-work.** As [Austin Kleon has demonstrated](#), being creative requires using your hands (books, paper, pencils, pens, highlighters, scissors, tape) and computing (research, text-only outlines, carefully formatted manuscripts, integration of images and text). For example, literal cut and paste is often the best way to reorganize a draft. Line editing by hand can be much faster than on screen. Think about the strengths of each tool—and your preferences—and purposefully seek the best ones for writing tasks.

Three “Do this if possible” items can make a big difference, so while they are last here, note that thinking about them is first above:

7. **Get time distance.** Schedule your writing so you have time to set your writing aside for 24, 48, or 72 hours and forget about it a little — then come back to it with fresh eyes. This is easily said — but can be hard to do without careful time management.
8. **Get peer review.** Work with your partners and co-workers to get feedback—honest feedback—about your drafts. For grants, program officers will sometimes read and offer comments on a draft proposal or a one-pager. This is essential. Others will see things you do

not see, and miss things you do not miss, from line-level errors to the highest order issues like how to reach given audiences. Build peer review into your writing schedule.

9. **Test.** Ask someone else to read your writing and use it for its stated purpose—for example, if you write a recipe, have someone actually make the dish. If that’s not possible, ask them to imagine doing so, voicing their reactions out loud as they read and interact with your work. More about this in the books below.

Resources in the Purdue Libraries

Please [let me know](#) if you have trouble with any of the links here. For many, you will need to log in to the Purdue Libraries and/or the [Purdue proxy server](#) using BoilerKey before access.

In the syllabus, I recommend Ginny Redish’s *Letting Go of the Words*, which is presented as a “writing for the web” book but has value far beyond that.

- Redish, G. (2013). [Letting go of the words: Writing web content that works](#) (2nd ed.). Morgan Kaufman. [E-book accessible through Purdue Libraries.](#)

Above I suggest having the [style manual relevant for your field](#). Many style manuals suggest looking to the *Chicago Manual of Style* for matters they do not describe. The current edition is 17/e, available online:

- University of Chicago. (2017). [The Chicago manual of style, online](#) (17th ed.). University of Chicago Press. [Accessible through Purdue Libraries.](#)

Professional editing is a complex skill that requires knowledge of conventions, styles, and language. Amy Einsohn’s *The Copyeditors’ Handbook* offers both an introduction to the art and craft of professional editing and a condensed guide to style and grammar.

- Einsohn, A. & Schwartz, M. (2019). [The copyeditor’s handbook: A guide for book publishing and corporate communications](#) (4th ed.). University of California Press. [E-book accessible through Purdue Libraries.](#)

Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, mentioned above, has lots of other value as well.

- Lamott, A. (1994). [Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life](#). Anchor Books. [E-book accessible through Purdue libraries.](#)

Rule #9 above refers to testing. While it is intended for use with web sites, Steve Krug’s [Rocket surgery made easy](#) (2009) offers a very readable, accessible primer adaptable to testing documents.

Other resources

I’ve collated some ideas on [editing for concision in a short handout](#). That includes Richard Lanham’s “[Paramedic method](#),” developed in his book *Revising Prose*, which has a bad name but is super useful.

The [Purdue Writing Lab](#) is NOT for “bad writers” — they offer help for anyone and their goal is to make folks better writers. They offer both online and in-person consultation. Go!

The [Mailchimp style guide](#) is specific to their company and mission but includes a lot of great content about writing, collaboration, and specific styles.

Style manuals

The big four are APA, Chicago, AP, and MLA. I mention Chicago above; here are the other three:

- American Psychological Association (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association: The official guide to APA style* (7th ed.). American Psychological Association.
- Associated Press. (2022). *The Associated Press stylebook* (56th ed.). Associated Press.
- Modern Language Association (2021). *The MLA Handbook* (9th ed.). Modern Language Association.

The [Purdue OWL](#) offers abbreviated versions of all of the above, but having the source is better.

Other books to buy

These books have been published recently in multiple editions, but used copies of earlier editions are still very useful and are a lot cheaper. Find them through [ABEBooks](#), [Better World Books](#), or similar book sellers. Feel free to ask about specific recommendations if you like.

Joseph M. Williams wrote the first version of *Style: Lessons in clarity and grace* in 1981, building on material developed for the “Little Red Schoolhouse” writing courses at the University of Chicago. There are now two versions, one full (Lessons) and one abridged (Basics), though the latter has gotten longer recently.

Here are the current editions. Williams died in 2008, and his long-time collaborator Greg Colomb in 2011, so Joseph Bizup is now co-author of the books.

- Williams, J. M. & Bizup, J. (2017). *Style: Lessons in clarity and grace* (12th ed). Pearson. 256pp.
- Williams, J. M. & Bizup, J. (2015). *Style: The basics of clarity and grace* (5th ed). Pearson. 176pp.

Lanham’s *Revising Prose* is very similar, and expounds on the paramedic method with lots of useful examples.

- Lanham, R. (2006). *Revising prose* (5th ed). Pearson.

Finally, a technical communication book can offer guidance with common forms such as proposals, memoranda, and documentation. Many used books will do. I like Paul Anderson’s *Technical communication: A reader-centered approach*, in the 6th or 7th edition. Ask Dilger; he may have ones to share.

Document history

2024-0215: Links updated, a few other things fixed.

2022-0212: First complete version published and linked to the detailed schedule.

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