

UNIT 2: WRITING WELL AND MOTIVATING OTHERS THROUGH PLANNING

OVERVIEW

In unit 1 you learned about some types of communication and the characteristics of communication in general. In this unit, we describe the ingredients of good written communication as well as some factors that inhibit it. The goal of this unit is to convey the idea that effective written communication is based on the ingredients of good planning and scheduling, careful audience analysis, effective information gathering, logical organization, and skilled presentation.

We will describe general methods for understanding each writing task and its intended audience, how to choose appropriate words and construct sentences, and how to control the mechanics of writing. You will learn to examine the scope of each writing task by thinking not only about the length of what you write, but also about the effect your writing might have on your audience and within your group and organization. As we look at the prewriting, writing, and postwriting steps in the process, we will show how understanding the entire writing process can lead managers to insights about how to improve employee writing and manage the writing process.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you should be able to:

- list the ingredients and processes associated with effective written communication
- describe general methods for understanding a variety of writing tasks for different audiences
- recognize ineffective words, and show how word choice and mechanics can be influenced by planning and analysis
- describe stages in the writing process, and identify problems that can arise at each stage

- show concrete ways in which a manager's understanding of the writing process can contribute to better communication

DISCUSSION

Most managers in today's business environments recognize how up-front planning and analysis contribute to success. Managers often become managers because of their ability to plan, organize, marshal resources, and gather and report information. Some employees and managers, however, fail to apply these same skills and techniques to writing tasks and are surprised when their memos and reports do not communicate information effectively.

Often, however, miscommunication occurs subtly; for example, through the poor timing of important memos (often the result of poor production planning), or through inadequate choice of media for delivering crucial information. Understanding the various prewriting steps can alert writers to thought processes they should go through before they write: task analysis when writing procedures or describing how something works; primary and secondary audience analysis; information design and outlining; and planning for production, delivery, and archiving.

Managers who understand prewriting and who insist on reviewing preliminary drafts of reports, for example, can encourage employees to view writing as an iterative process. Similarly, encouraging employees to discuss assignments with others, or to share outlines prior to writing, conveys approval of brainstorming and collaborative writing techniques that can make writing less intimidating for individual writers.

WHAT WRITING HAS COME TO MEAN

Writing is a form of verbal communication in which ideas and words formulated in the mind are written down. Until recently, most of the words and ideas that constituted writing were written and stored on paper or other physical media. From the fifteenth century on, hand-written and printed forms of writing were accumulated in books and documents, which were in turn stored in collections and libraries for public and private use. In the twentieth century, technological advances have brought about changes in the presentation media and storage capabilities for written material, making it possible to separate writing from its medium and even from many of the presentation characteristics its author intended.

Although changes in the technology of writing have had a profound effect on modern businesses, the act of writing is still a personal and, for some, often a difficult experience. Most professional and many nonprofessional positions now require regular written communication as part of the job, and managers must assess writing and provide ways of improving employee writing as well as their own. Often written communication skill is one of the evaluation factors superiors use in assigning promotions, awarding salary increases, and expanding employees' responsibilities. Because of the prominence of writing within organizations, it is important for managers to understand what makes for effective writing in business environments.

EFFECTIVE WRITING

Effective writing must be cultivated. It is an acquired rather than an innate human talent, which requires practice, education, and management. Although few employees may realize it, writing employs a variety of acquired skills and inherent traits that many people already possess: good planning habits, clear thinking, good organization, a passion for truth, altruism, inquisitiveness, and a willingness to experiment. Writing is effective when these skills are brought to bear on the writing task.

Table 2.1 on the following page illustrates some characteristics of good writing and identifies specific skills or vital ingredients associated with them.

Table 2.1
Some Vital Ingredients to Good Writing

Characteristics of Good Writing	Vital Ingredients
Clear, accessible, reader-based	Planning, audience analysis, good mechanics, document design
Accurate	Good research, good review, writer integrity
Comprehensive	Good planning, adequate resources, prewriting
Memorable	Good word choice and arrangement, appropriate style and tone

Reader-based Versus Writer-based Prose

Most people respond to attention paid them, and readers are certainly no exception. In his well-known book on writing, *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser (1976) notes that most good writers prefer to think of those who read their work as their audience. Such thinking is appropriate, Zinsser notes, because of the writer's constant need (similar to the actor's need) to be continually attentive to a group of people who are figuratively present and demanding throughout the writer's performance.

In reality, writing audiences consist of readers who interpret what a writer is trying to communicate through the writer's choice of and arrangement of words. **Reader-based writing** is that in which deliberate attempts are made to hold the reader's attention. It differs from **writer-based writing** in the degree to which it focuses on the reader's, rather than the writer's, expectations. Under the communications paradigm discussed in unit 1, it might be said that reader-based writing is specially encoded communication that is deliberately constructed to convey meaning and elicit favorable response. It is writing from which the writer is distanced, having fully digested the meaning to be conveyed and having packaged the meaning especially for delivery to a special audience.

To achieve reader-based writing, planning is essential. Planning for writing involves more than just scheduling when something will be written or when it will be produced. Effective planning for either a major writing project or a simple memo should include each of the following activities.

Audience and Task Analysis

The audience analysis phase of planning to write is probably the most important and often the most difficult to perform. **Audience analysis** requires a writer to focus on the immediate readership for the document being written, the primary readers of the document, as well as on other potential or secondary readers. During audience analysis, writers ask questions such as the following to create a mental picture of their audience:

- What are the predominant characteristics of my audience? Age? Sex? Education? Job?
- How many different kinds of people (especially how many different occupations, cultures, backgrounds) are represented in my immediate audience?
- Who is the secondary audience for what I write? For example, what might happen to my document if it were released to others in the corporation?
- When will this writing be read? Immediately? Tomorrow? In six months?
- For how long can I expect my audience to continue reading my document? For how long after they finish will the information still be valid?

Answering these questions shapes writing even before the first word is written. Many professional writers make choices on the basis of their formal audience analysis, such as that provided in written information plans (discussed in unit 4). At a minimum, most successful writers plan informally, based on what they perceive to be the characteristics of their audience. When managers offer employment to a new employee, for example, they usually plan the letter of offer by making choices about the words they will use, the tone and style of presentation, what the letter will look like, as well as many other aspects of the writing.

Careful audience analysis might reveal to a writer that a majority of his or her audience is blind or visually impaired, which would necessitate braille presentation. Similarly, audience analysis might reveal that some readers reading a book, such as this course guide, have access to computers, and will receive and view the information online. Likewise, audience analysis may reveal that operators operating a piece of heavy equipment seldom have free hands with which to hold and read a hardcopy book. Consequently, information for these operators may have to be designed to account for their inability to use their hands to read the information.

An important part of audience analysis is analyzing the tasks that readers will wish or need to accomplish by reading what is written. In working environments, these tasks are often

related to the jobs they do. In the following example, you can see how one technical analyst's knowledge of the audience's job habits and needs has affected the presentation of the writing.

Audience	Writing
Secretaries	Adding this word processing system to your office environment will increase your efficiency—eliminating the need for two-handed typing through an easy-to-use mouse, freeing you to pursue the many other tasks you perform while you sit at your work station.

To perform task analysis, writers visualize their readers' response in terms of the actions they will take after they have read the writing. For example, a manager might analyze what employees will be expected to do after having read an important management memo—revise their vacation plans, stop smoking in the halls, begin using a new tool, take a different route to work. Determining—in specific terms—the tasks that readers will perform helps writers decide issues such as the following:

- how much to write and how to format the writing so that it is easily accessible and convincing
- what form the writing should take—for example, whether it should be written as a memo, a procedure, a news flash
- what words to use and what level of technical explanation to include

Even when readers might be expected to perform many different tasks, task analysis can still assist writers in prioritizing what is presented in their writing. A writer explaining to first-time taxpayers how to process income taxes, for example, might determine from task analysis that telling readers where to pick up or deposit tax forms is just as important as telling them how to fill in the forms.

Resource and Time Analysis

No matter how familiar a writer is with his or her audience, a certain amount of time and energy must also go into analyzing the resources and time available for the writer to accomplish the writing task. Most business writers experience time and resource constraints that could inhibit their ability to produce their best writing. Effective business writers, however, plan

writing assignments so that issues associated with resources and timing are clearly identified at the start.

As an example, take the XYZ Corporation's yearly report. Every year, XYZ's CEO enacts the same scenario of not deciding until April when the report should be published and arranging through May for a writer to handle the project. By the time the writer takes over in June, the report is already months behind schedule, no resources have been identified, and no information is clearly and indisputably available to be published. The writer spends most of July and August collecting information to go into the report, having decided that he or she is already too far behind to identify possible sources of assistance for information gathering. By September, a first draft is available, and by October, everyone has agreed on what the writer should do to improve the second draft. That leaves little time to rewrite the draft and arrange for final approvals and publishing. November and December are a sleepless blur of pleadings for approval and spur-of-the-moment press checks as the writer approaches the inevitable end-of-the-year deadline for publishing the yearly report.

Unrealistic? Perhaps the assignment itself is, because few business writers have the luxury of a single project to focus on for an entire half-year! In fact, for many writers in modern professional environments—and especially for managers—simultaneous, ongoing projects with writing components are the norm. For these writers especially, time management and early identification of resources is crucial to success.

Identifying Resources

Writing resources can be people; books, speeches, and documents; writing and production equipment; and information stored in databases. Frequently, other people supply writers with information or insights, and they can provide writing input to large writing projects.

Identifying writing resources and devising plans for acquiring or accessing them is an important part of planning to write. Depending on the size and complexity of the writing project, these resources can represent a significant part of the budget for a writing project, and accessing or acquiring them can make a difference in the quality of the writing product.

Managing Time

In modern work environments, automated scheduling tools, such as *Timeline*, *Microsoft Project*, and *Project Manager*, can assist managers and employees in tracking **writing milestones** (planned events such as reviews) that occur during the writing cycle.

Automated scheduling tools can help managers keep track of multiple writing assignments that their employees may be engaged in simultaneously. They can provide at a glance a measurement of progress on each project. For example, many of the tools include graphic timelines that indicate critical path activities and synchronized slippage. This information allows managers to control the progress of writing projects by focusing on **critical-path activities**—activities that must be performed at a given time in the life of a project to successfully complete the project. In addition to critical-path activities, most automated scheduling tools can also show you what happens when milestones are not met. For example, they can depict **synchronized slippage**, indicating how other milestones are affected when one milestone is not met during the allotted time.

Figures 2.1a and 2.1b, created with *MicroSoft Project*, show writing activities for a number of departmental writing projects as they might be tracked by a department manager using such an automated tool.

Unit 2: Writing Well and Motivating Others Through Planning

Figure 2.1a
MicroSoft Project Sample File

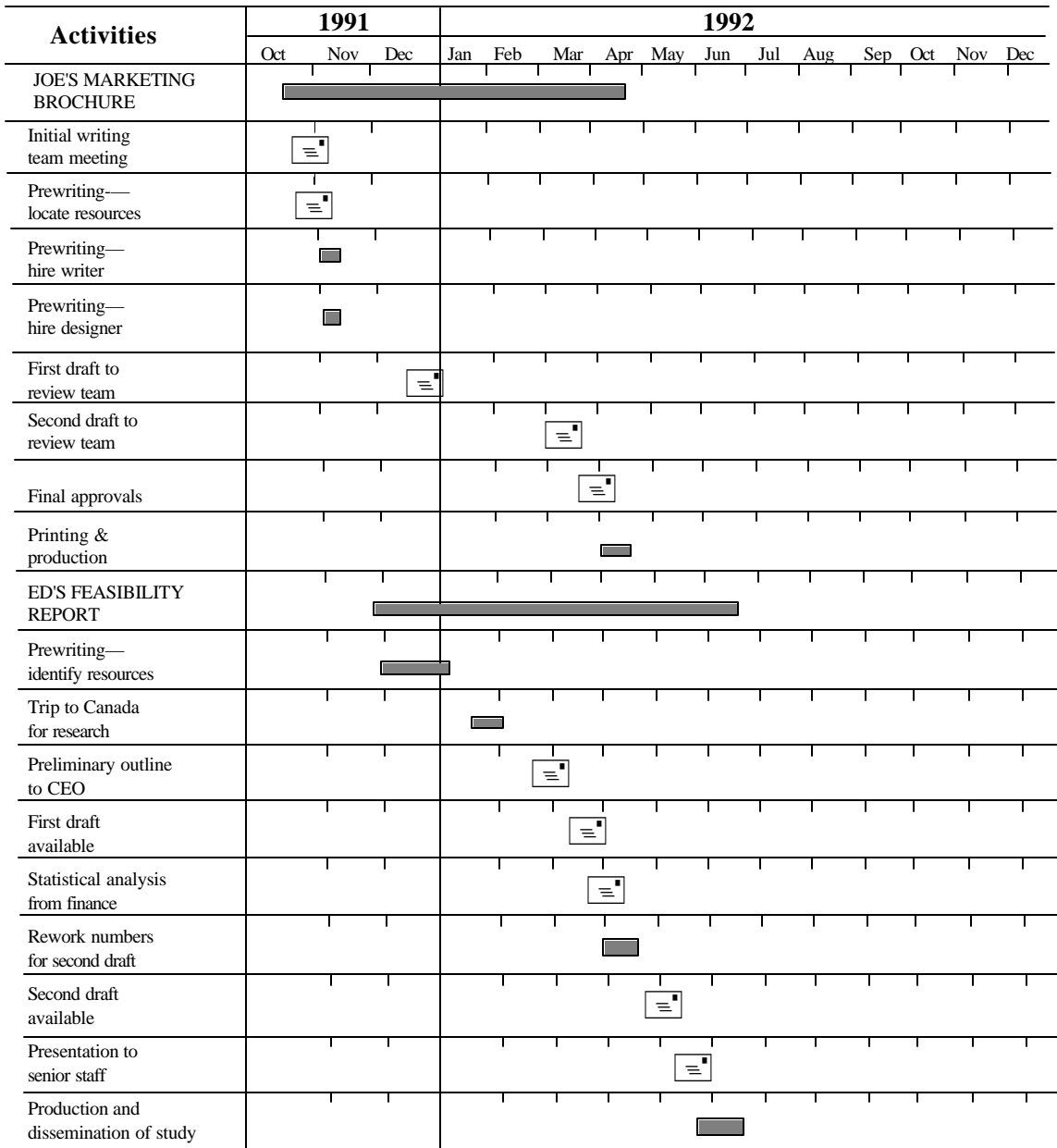


Figure 2.1b
MicroSoft Project Sample File

Activities	Projected		Actual	
	Start	End	Start	End
JOE'S MARKETING BROCHURE	10/18/91	4/15/92	10/18/92	
Initial writing team meeting	10/28/91	10/28/91		
Prewriting—locate resources	10/28/91	10/31/91		
Prewriting—hire writer	11/1/91	11/11/91		
Prewriting—hire designer	11/1/91	11/11/91		
First draft to review team	12/20/91	12/22/91		
Second draft to review team	3/9/92	3/9/92		
Final approvals	3/28/92	3/28/92		
Printing & production	3/29/92	4/13/92		
ED'S FEASIBILITY REPORT	11/28/91	6/16/92		
Prewriting—identify resources	11/30/91	1/4/92		
Trip to Canada for research	1/15/92	2/1/92		
Preliminary outline to CEO	2/28/92	2/28/92		
First draft available	3/15/92	3/15/92		
Statistical analysis from finance	3/30/92	3/30/92		
Rework numbers for second draft	3/30/92	4/16/92		
Second draft available	4/30/92	4/30/92		
Presentation to senior staff	5/15/92	5/16/92		
Production and dissemination of study	5/20/92	6/16/92		

Whether tracking writing projects is done manually or online, successful time management, of course, requires realistic scheduling as well as a means for tracking milestones. Realistic scheduling, in turn, requires accurate understanding of the various activities that are part of the typical writing cycle. Later in this unit, we discuss the writing process. All planning depends on some understanding of this process. Good schedules, in addition, require accurate assessment of the complexity of each writing task and an understanding of each writing environment as well.

WEEDING OUT BAD WRITING

One of the benefits of good planning and up-front analysis is better control of the mechanics of writing. Audience and task analysis, and resource and time management all help to improve the mechanics of writing even as they make it easier for writers to go through the writing process. For one thing, audience analysis helps writers determine the best mechanics and proper word choice, and it can suggest ways to eliminate errors in writing before they occur.

Subject-verb agreement, faulty punctuation, erratic capitalization, and misspelling are four problems often considered to be **mechanical**. Some strategies for improving these problems in employee writing include:

- making grammar and punctuation courses available free to employees
- establishing peer reviews or peer consultant relationships among employees
- never accepting a first draft that has not first been spell-checked
- encouraging focus groups among employees to explore the need for accuracy and to establish policies for use by other employees concerning the acceptable level of errors in an initial draft or working copy
- providing award incentives for the best written report in organizations that generate reports regularly

Knowing what words are likely to offend an audience and avoiding them can increase a writer's effectiveness. Depending on circumstances, certain words and phrases might prove ineffective or even offensive when used in managerial writing for employees. To know which words might inhibit communication with employees, managers must know their audience. For example, some words that might offend certain employees are:

Specialized words:

- Bureaucratish or jargon such as—*maximal, optimization, inflammatory, throughput, end result*. Managers who tell employees that the "end result of productivity measures will be the optimization of company assets," have told them little that is of value.
- Words frequently used in legal (especially criminal) proceedings—*alleged, provocation, evidence, grounds, testimony*. Managers who use such words to describe employee behavior, as in "the alleged offender was seen reporting in at 10:00 A.M.," often exacerbate already deteriorating relations with employees.
- Words that are generally confined to use within the military or within technical disciplines—*roger-that, over and out, multitasking, high resolution*. Managers who repeatedly and unnecessarily use phrases such as "over and out" when addressing employees on company intercoms, for example, can create a strained atmosphere and invite ridicule.

Words that evoke negative emotion:

- Words with a history of use in hostile labor/management disputes—*strike, scab, strikebreaker*. Such words used by managers in employee or union negotiations frequently impede progress in the negotiations by creating an "us versus them" mentality.
- Words whose meaning depends on the perception of the reader or listener, or words that exhibit gender or race bias—*girl* and *gal* (instead of woman), *foreigner, immigrant, emigrant, minority*. Managers who refer frequently to "those foreigners" within the American work force or "minorities" within a corporation fail to recognize the diversity of the work force and may offend their employees by being insensitive to how the employees perceive themselves.

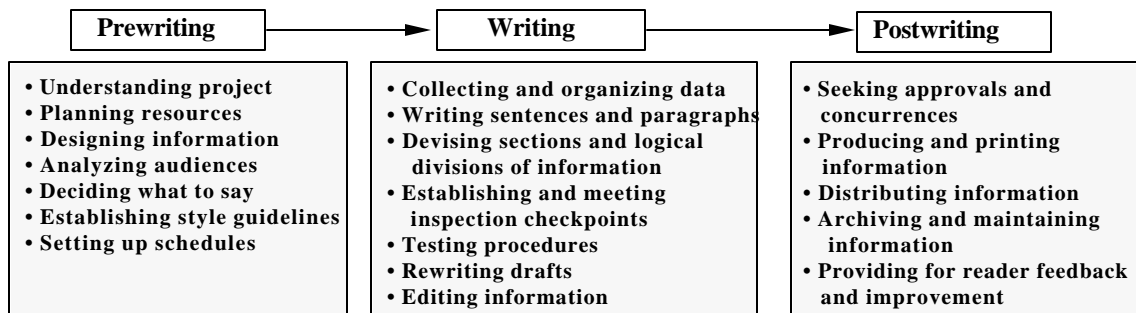
THE WRITING PROCESS

The idea that writing should be process- rather than product-oriented is a relatively new idea derived from the study of rhetoric, discourse, and psychology and enhanced by technology.

The writing process, a paradigm of activities in which writers typically engage, includes three basic stages:

1) **prewriting**, in which planning and analysis take place, 2) **writing**, in which words are arranged to convey meaning, and 3) **postwriting**, which can involve a number of evaluative activities as well as writing production, storage, and retrieval. Within these stages, numerous activities—depicted in figure 2.2—define the process.

Figure 2.2
The Writing Process



Although none of the three stages of the writing process have set durations, their distinction as separate stages in the process is important for conveying the pace at which writing occurs.

Writing can suffer when writers do not go through each stage of the process.

Prewriting

Take, for example, the prewriting stage. This often-neglected stage includes the planning activities discussed earlier in this unit. It is during this stage that other activities, such as brainstorming, can occur. In the prewriting stage, planning and analysis take place and writers prepare the groundwork for the writing stage that follows.

Prewriting is often accompanied by procrastination, especially among less experienced writers. Procrastination can be remedied by management direction and goal setting during the prewriting stage. Writers who skip this stage and attempt to move directly to the writing stage often find that much of their time is spent doubling back to perform prewriting activities—false starts, outlining, researching, planning.

When actual writing does emerge, it can require more reworking than planned writing. Many managers discover too late that some employees falter during the prewriting stage. They may be surprised, for example, when an employee who has worked on a report for a month submits nothing more than an outline. Writers who are conscious of the prewriting stage, on the other hand, engage in calculated planning activities during which details can be ironed out, issues identified, and approaches solidified. They move to the writing stage better prepared to produce functional first drafts and to complete the writing process with a minimum of frustration or interruption.

Writing

Writing occurs when writers begin to create and arrange words to convey sustained meaning. Writers occasionally become blocked at this stage and are unable to generate additional ideas. Management intervention and a return to (often uncompleted) prewriting tasks can help writers overcome writers' block and resume productivity.

During the transition from prewriting to the writing stage, single-word ideas generated during brainstorming in the prewriting stage are developed and expanded to provide the substance of the writer's text. Rudimentary outlines become full paragraphs or sections of reports. Writers create transitions between ideas as the actual writing is generated.

Two problems associated with making the transition are an inability to make the transition to writing complete sentences and an inability to create, shape, and fill expanded paragraphs or sections of reports. Particularly with the latter, additional prewriting can help writers fill in missing information or rethink steps overlooked in previous hastily or inadequately done prewriting sessions.

Postwriting

A direct result of following the first two writing stages carefully is that postwriting becomes a much more evaluative experience, and one that is voluntarily undertaken. Writers who view writing as a process more readily see the value of postwriting activities. Through postwriting, writers increase their understanding of the writing process and learn to assess the value of their techniques and procedures with an eye to future improvements.

Postwriting can encompass the actual production phase of a writing project, and for writers it can be a productive time for assessing what they have recently completed. Causal analysis and other evaluative techniques used during this phase can assist writers in determining their own weaknesses and can help writing teams work out difficulties that they experience during team writing projects. Managers can encourage these objectives and encourage the postwriting stage by allowing employees leave to engage in postwriting and by helping them to enact any recommendations that arise as a result of the evaluation.

Managers who understand the writing process can create similar understanding in their employees. Moreover, managers who also plan employee writing can work to ensure that employees have sufficient opportunity to enact the writing process. Allowing employees more time for writing, and providing more feedback to them earlier in the writing process, will usually result in better written analyses and reports. Increasing writing opportunities, moreover, can allow employees valuable practice time in the course of their day-to-day activities, which can result in less fear of major writing assignments.

Suggestions for providing writing opportunities that might improve employee understanding of the writing process include:

- having all members of the department jointly devise a policies and procedures manual for your department
- writing a tips and techniques document to be distributed to persons new to the department
- selecting 10 commonly enacted routines and documenting them with an eye to improving the ways in which they are currently done

REFERENCE

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1976.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Discuss three aspects of writing that benefit from up-front planning.
2. What happens in each of the three stages of the writing process? List one way in which management's understanding of each stage can contribute to successful writing.
3. How and when does the transition from prewriting to writing occur? List two problems writers typically encounter during this transition.
4. Most project management strategies encourage managers to identify activities performed during a project and to evaluate how important they are to successful completion of the project. Such activities are usually described as being on the critical path because their completion is essential to the completion of other tasks. Based on this definition of *critical path*, what kinds of postwriting activities would you describe as critical path? List at least three activities.
5. Why is poor word choice often symptomatic of poor audience analysis?
6. List four problems typically encountered in business writing that you might consider to be mechanical in nature. What strategies or incentives might be used to encourage employees to correct mechanical problems in their writing?
7. What is task analysis and for what kind of writing is it an important part of audience analysis?
8. How might an audience influence the design of information? List three practical examples.

INTEGRATING QUESTIONS

1. To what extent should managers plan writing tasks for employees?
2. Discuss three strategies for teaching planning skills and for encouraging employees to devote more time to prewriting.
3. Do you think it is important for companies to have comprehensive information strategies to assist managers and employees in planning writing tasks? Why or why not?
4. What are three strategies managers can use to improve the research and analytical skills of employees that do not involve further formal education?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Devise a list of writing opportunities that you might offer to employees in your organization as a means for improving writing. Do not list formal writing education as an activity, but rather, devise the list based on the jobs that the employees ordinarily perform.
- Rewrite a job description for one employee that you manage so that it includes at least one significant writing activity.
- Assign one employee the task of planning an entire writing project from start to finish before the project begins. Review the employee's plan, and then track the progress of the project according to the schedule that the employee includes in the plan.

SUGGESTED READING

Cunningham, Donald H., and Thomas E. Pearsall. *How to Write for the World of Work*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1986.

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