

# Write Faster, Write Better - 1

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) **ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:8 August 2013**

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## **We Want to Share Our Experience in Writing**

In this series of *Notes*, we would like to share some of our experience in writing some sort of technical documents in our work places. We want to help students and faculty in need of writing faster and writing better to learn how to write faster and write better. Modern times demand that we acquire this skill so that we become not only efficient in our work but also process our thinking in a more qualitative way to achieve better communication.

## **The Audience**

We have thousands of engineering and technology colleges all over the country. Almost every engineering and technology university tries to help students to write technical reports and master the formats of these reports. Business schools also focus on business analysis and persuasive writing to sell commodities, etc. Basic Sciences and Humanities subjects also demand writing faster and writing better, not simply for the sake of examination, but also for the sake of improving research methods and presentation.

Skills of our research scholars as well as engineering graduates must be improved in terms of their writing ability. Filling proforma materials also requires great skill. This should also be considered as part of writing.

Filling proforma is a task that ranges from the simple to the complex. Students need to prepare various need-based applications to apply for jobs both in the government and non-government organizations. Our experience is that the young students may have very high academic qualifications and may be very good in their respective fields. But when it comes to writing materials to present, most of the time they prove themselves misfit. Subsequently they get frustrated and dejected in life. In order to make them come out of this, we have to inculcate confidence in them. We the senior teachers should work with these boys and girls, share our experience and make them excel within a short period of time.

## **Spoken versus Written**

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Remember while spoken language is the primary form of language, written form of language has assumed greater importance throughout the ages. Our entire system of education depends on writing, even when we emphasize rightly the importance of oral presentation.

### **Our Simple Background**

The authors of these *Notes* are, or have been, part of a central government organization for most part of their service. We have also taught in numerous workshops on how to design, prepare/write and evaluate materials for various textbooks, etc. We have been asked to write one note or another analyzing some proposals given by various scholars and institutions. We have also been asked to write project proposals seeking funds from state, national and international agencies.

We have been asked to write “notes of observation” on any material that was passed on to us by the Director of the institution we were or are serving. Audit objections have to be answered as quickly as demanded by the Internal Audit section. We have prepared innumerable outlines and/or syllabus of workshops and have done our best to sell the ideas contained therein to various government and non-government agencies.

We, the authors of this series of *Notes*, share one common denominator: For example, Sam Mohan Lal, as detailed below, could dissect animals and insects during his undergraduate studies with great confidence, but he did not have any confidence even to write a single sentence in English. He came from a Tamil background and at every point of time lost his confidence when he had to compete with others because of lack of adequate skills in English. We all shared the same feeling since we all came from Tamil medium classes. Tamil medium was very good for us to learn the content of various subjects and to do appropriate analysis of the issues before us. However, when we had to move from Tamil situations to pan-Indian and International contexts, we had no other way except trying our best to use the little English knowledge we all acquired through rote learning with not much practice to achieve our goals via the level of English we had mastered. Even though this was a disadvantage in the beginning, we all could develop confidence in what we did through hard work and willingness to learn just as Sam Mohanlal did. Now, Sam Mohanlal has trained many several scholars and those who have been trained by him serve in several parts of India and in various countries doing great at work.

### **Using Effective Language**

Often we have to present in our ideas in a non-offensive language, while firmly presenting our as well as the institution’s viewpoints. We have to politely criticize even the worst writing and vacuous proposals. We were always under the supervision and authority of a senior official either the Director of the institution or the senior officials of the Ministry in New Delhi.

### **Role of Supervisory Authority**

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Sometimes it is hard to openly review and criticize the proposals and suggestions of our seniors in hierarchy, and yet if we do not present it in some acceptable manner, they would consider us incompetent, or not interested in the job we do. There are many contexts which force us to be careful, pro-active, polite, and efficient in the using of words, phrases, and sentences.

The material must be clear and easy to follow, and must present the essential ideas, processes, etc. in as brief a report as possible. It is customary that our senior authority to demand a half-page note of a fifty-page note or report sent to us! We do understand their predicament: they have many innumerable and important responsibilities apart from their frequent travels forced upon them by the position they hold.

### **Our Purpose**

So, what is the purpose of all this “rambling presented above? Just to mention that if you want to advance further in your career and to gain confidence of your seniors and recognition of your talents from all around you, you have to be a good, diligent writer. In addition, it is needless to say that we were never given a comfortable cushioning time to “meditate” over the request and demand from above or below. Everything has/had its time limit specified. So, efficiency, unfortunately, is measured also in terms of the speed with which we finished our report and submitted to the authority.

### **We’ve Learned Our Lessons, and are Continuing to Learn!**

We the authors of this series of *Notes* have learned our lessons through agonizing experience. Thirumalai reports that he became a lower division clerk immediately at the end of his Bachelor’s degree university examination. He thought that working in an office would give him opportunity to learn the processes of management. However, his major assignment every day was to write reminders to the applicants who had applied for some assistance to buy fishing net, etc., since these applicants did not provide all the details in their applications and petitions.

Likewise he had to write reminders to many internal officials in various districts of Tamilnadu and to the Directorate of Fisheries. On an average he wrote a minimum of 40-60 reminders.

Fortunately for him this writing was mostly a copying of the proforma reminder with some suitable changes in address and/or text message. He was patient and wondered how he even learned anything in this monotonous writing. But this gave him some command over the sentences and forms of letters officials and offices are asked to write on a daily basis.

Sam Mohanlal, another author of this series of *Notes*, came from the background of a zoologist and thus always has an inclination to dissect, including the sentences and phrases of any document. He had already mastered the so-called “scientific” style by writing his lab reports in an established format. His attitude to writing has been that precision should prevail over the

use of many words in a passage or long sentences in any text. He would present his case with arguments from both the sides and choose what is most relevant for the present question and context.

Through this process Sam Mohanlal might have raised some anxiety in others but ultimately the questions raised were seen to be relevant. The strength of his approach lay and lies in his ability to engage in discussion. For most of us who are under pressure to complete our writing and be done with our assignment imposed on us by the institution and its senior officials, this may be a welcome step, at first instance. However, if we have to write a report that takes care of all the pros and cons of the issue, there is no escape from his approach.

Nadaraja Pillai also had acquired a Bachelor's degree in science and thus three years of listening to monotonous science lectures in the classroom prepared him well enough to tackle organization aspects of report writing in addition to presenting facts and figures without any personal element or emotional content. As Sam Mohanlal and Nadaraja Pillai were from the science background and were contemporaries in the same institution, they often exchanged notes, mostly critical comments on the need or otherwise for writing such long notes, demanded by various authorities and how in the process we could easily get lost and could miss the major points.

Nadaraja Pillai as well as Sam Mohanlal focused on the applied aspects of language use, such as grammar, spelling, sentence types, sentence and paragraph construction and the flow of content in any Note they have to prepare. In addition, sociolinguistic implications for the overall audience were also focused upon.

Balakumar is from the heart of Tamilandu. Please allow us to describe Madurai and the well-known Madurai Kamaraj University with its celebrated science and humanities departments, as the heart of Tamilnadu. After all, this city was described as the City that Never Sleeps in an ancient classic in Tamil written two-thousand years ago. Like all of us, Balakumar worked his way from below, with hard work and adequate willingness to submit to authority required in Indian contexts.

Balakumar's focus turned out to be on evaluation, and what is better than this specialization to critically create and examine the drafts before these are "submitted"? Kindly note that "submit" and "submission" are keywords in any hierarchically organized institution. Following established rules and processes are an integral part of every organization.

Writing needs to take care of these two elements, even as we assert our independent thinking and analysis, within the parameters of developing better communication, mutual respect and serious and critical analysis of reports produced without any rancor.

Through evaluation, Balakumar has been able to bring around some cohesion between the present and the past, an essential feature of any technical report.

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Ramamoorthy has experience with a combination of both university and central government institutions. These two institutions have certain fundamental differences when it comes to the types and quality of writing, even as they share many common features. Central government institutions are geared to research, but they are also heavily focused on writing reports, technical and non-technical, writing drafts of letters, producing draft after draft based on the instruction of the hierarchy such as Directors, Ministry officials, et al.

Not a day passes without Ramamoorthy writing one report or another, one summary or another, one proposal or another, etc. While it is possible that many of these commandeered or self-generated materials may be actually “filed” and not processed further, it is important that communication must be carried on by generating documents.

In addition, officers like Ramamoorthy are also required to write their own research papers, monographs, reviews and evaluations of published and yet to be published materials.

University writing for most of us working as faculty members revolves around reading and preparing class notes for lectures, discussions, seminars and workshops. Not every faculty member is asked to write reports on a daily basis to submit to higher officials in the University.

On the other hand, institutions run by governments are more heavily dependent on reports, analyses, reminders, discussions on technical aspects and most importantly on the organization and conduct of programmes. The term *programme* is an important term when it comes to institutions. In addition, financial report writing and then generating documents to prove or disprove that the program has been effective, etc.

Ramamoorthy, thus, has experience in both the worlds of academia and government machinery.

### **Our Purpose is NOT to Blow Our Own Horns!**

When we report on our experience and duties that we performed or perform, it is not to blow our own horns. We give these as simple examples that we all may perform when it comes to writing materials. Check your own experience and you will associate yourselves with our purpose.

### **More Is and More Will Be Needed**

We do recognize that there are more complex and technical careers which require more detailed technical writing, etc. Also jobs do not carry identical workloads, and so your workload may be much heavier than our workloads. Yet there is certain underlying commonness in all what we do in our workplace when it comes to writing. We all want to write effective communicative pieces with suitable speed demanded and to write these reports in better form and language so that we achieve the goal of writing faster and writing better.

## **Write faster, Write Better!**

Don't these two phrases sound in conflicting relations to most of us? How can one achieve writing faster while at the same time writing the material better? They certainly sound they are in conflict with each other. Our personal observation of our co-workers and our own experience clearly show that these could be in conflict, almost unresolvable. However, our submission to you here is that these two apparently opposing views can be reconciled and both the goals achieved.

## **What Steps Can We Adopt?**

In these series of *Notes*, we propose to indicate in broad terms what steps we can take to write faster and write better.

## **We All Struggle!**

Let us first acknowledge the fact: We all struggle to write, not just to write better, but even to write. We all struggle to write – struggling to find the right word, to construct the right sentence that carries our intent clearly with appropriate tone for the content and to make ourselves understood by our readers. When we write we also write to persuade the writers to see our point of view and rationale, and accept our arguments, facts and presentation.

## **Not an Appropriate Goal in Itself**

We must recognize one important point: writing faster is not an appropriate goal in itself. It must be linked to write better to communicate effectively. At the same time we also need to emphasize that writing faster is a skill that we need to develop so that the demands on our time and job can be met effectively.

## **We as Writers Are Not in Competition! – A Continuous Process!**

When we talk of writing faster, it does not mean that we are in the competition to demonstrate how fast we can write down words and sentences, etc. You may be a skilled typist or a skilled word processor. You may be able to produce a number of words per minute or per hour faster than others. However, to choose and select the right word and use it in appropriate sentences and then into appropriate texts requires more skills such as pre-thinking, pre-planning and a good grip over the matter on hand. It may be difficult to have a good grip over the matter, but in course of writing, we should add to the knowledge and understanding of the matter that we are required to write about. In other words, we need to remember writing faster and better is a continuous process of acquiring information and analyzing it for better and effective communication. The words should flow through our hand, in some sense!

## **Several Important Issues Relating to Write Faster, Write Better!**

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We shall see several issues that help and hamper writing faster and better in subsequent *Notes*. These Notes will also provide helpful suggestions to improve our writing faster and better.

1. Begin to develop interest in word processing because very soon you will also be forced to own your own laptop or use your computer in office! In addition, writing long hand is now becoming a thing of the past. Mastery of Word processing and other types of software for accounting, report writing, producing technical tables, etc. has become crucial tools for writing faster and better. For example, you are now given the facility to correct your spelling, punctuation and grammar. Software may suggest suitable alternatives to the words and phrases you've used.

2. Begin with some regular typewriting lessons so that you will be looking at the screen, composing your thoughts in words and sentences not into the complexity of the key board. Now and then you may look at the key board, but speed is likely to be hindered if you have to do your word processing by looking into your key board for typing every word and sentence. Typewriters may have become obsolete from the point of view of many, but the authors of these *Notes* believe that for Indians it is still better to acquire speed in typing through some training in typing.

3. Remember Word Processing goes beyond typing as it provides you with some steps to improve your choice of words, sentences, etc. even as it helps you to write faster!

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