



THE CROSSMAN CRASH COURSE FOR WRITING WITH CLARITY: STRUCTURE

Prepared by Susan Crossman
Crossman Communications
www.crossmancommunications.com
susan@crossmancommunications.com
905-469-1892

Great Writing Starts with Solid Structure

We tend to think of writing as a mechanical skill that takes good grammar and a decent vocabulary and somehow blends it all together to create clear communication. That's not a bad start but decades of experience have taught me that writing with impact is much more complex. One of the most important components? Good organization.

Before you can even hope to inform or influence a reader you absolutely must have an intelligent plan that focuses your thinking and guides your writing. I use a simple five-step kick-start for almost every document I write.

Here it is:

1. **Set your goals.** You need to start with a clear idea of what you want this piece to do for you. Do you want it to confirm your standing as an expert, influence readers to take action, inform people about something important or simply give you a chance to vent?
2. **Know your audience.** Your audience information will dictate the complexity of language needed, the type and amount of detail required and the overall voice necessary to reach your audience. Miss this piece and you blow your chance to connect.
3. **Collect your facts.** Writer's Block is often caused by a lack of pertinent information so whenever I hit that intellectual brick wall I generally head out and do more research. Filtering out irrelevant material is much easier than trying to invent details you should already have and it gives you the luxury of being selective about the information you include.

4. **Organize your information well.** Once you have corralled all the facts, what do you do with them? I organize them into four main categories that deal with:

- Why my topic is important
- What it involves
- How it works and
- What the future implications are.

I tack on a package of introductory information and a collection of conclusions and I'm good to go.

5. **Check for what's missing.** It's easy to get lost in detail but you also need to step back from all that glorious information and ask yourself what you've left out. You might have overlooked something stunningly basic and it's a lot easier to find that out before you start writing than to be called on the carpet for the omission at a later date.

Once you've done all this preliminary work you end up with a document that practically writes itself. We're off to a good start, but let's look at each goal in a little more detail.

Step One: You Need a Goal

Taking a moment to get a solid idea of the purpose of your document keeps your writing from wandering into irrelevant territory that might confuse or bore your audience. It also keeps you focused and selective, which gives much more impact to your words.

Most business communication falls into one of four categories and your goal for most writing projects will likely be to:

- Explain a situation
- Analyse an issue
- Promote a product or service *or*
- Inspire a reaction

If you're a writing keener and want to take it to another level entirely, bear this in mind: while your document will do *one* of the above it should also do *all three* of the following:

- Influence your audience
- Support one or more specific corporate targets *and*
- Deepen key relationships

Before I start to write anything official, I type a little note to myself that reads like this:



THE CROSSMAN CRASH COURSE FOR WRITING WITH CLARITY: STRUCTURE

"The purpose of this document is to _____ (answer from points 1-4 above).

"I want to influence my audience to _____.

"I need to make sure the following business goals are addressed _____.

"I want to inspire my audience to _____.

Obviously I fill in the blanks with whatever information is appropriate.

Once I have my direction clear I can be more discerning about the development of the rest of my article and I don't waste a second dithering. That makes me efficient and decisive and really adds to my enjoyment of the process of writing. It's not always as easy as 1,2,3 --but writing doesn't have to be a misery!

Step Two: Connect with Your Audience!

Step two along the way to creating a doc that rocks sets you up to clearly understand your audience.
This is a big one.

The success of efforts to promote a product, service, program or opinion is almost entirely dependent upon how well you connect with your audience. That means you need to know as much as possible about who they are, what they like and dislike, how they react to different values and ideas and what motivates them to act. Every word you write about your business, program or service needs to correspond to your audience's model of the world so you can develop the kind of rapport that invites trust.

Honesty is key and you need to be authentic in your determination to provide a quality product or service that truly meets an existing need in an existing audience. Finding that audience and speaking directly to them is what engagement is all about.

If there is a disconnect between what you offer and what your audience wants then you have two choices:

1. Change your product, service or program so that it corresponds more closely to audience demand or
2. Find a different audience – one that is more suited to what you offer.

Knowing your audience means gathering insights related to members' likely:

- Age
- Marital status
- Education
- Occupation
- Income level
- Family situation
- Interests and pursuits
- Geographic location
- Biggest challenges
- Greatest joys

When you start writing, this information will help you select words, phrases, metaphors and imagery that will resonate with your readers. It will also help you position different aspects of your offering (the “features”) as specific benefits that will improve readers’ lives in fundamental ways. An audience is rarely comprised of folks who are alike in every way and it’s tough to always know exactly who will be reading your material – but the more you do know, the more effective your writing ultimately will be.

Remember that writing to engage is not about what YOU feel is great about your product or service – it’s about what your audience needs, wants and cares about.

Step Three: Collect Your Facts

Information for most types of business writing tends to come from a variety of resources such as interviews, reports and resource material available online. You need to be a Detail Drone at this part of the process because it's often a tiny piece of innocuous information that can elevate your article to new heights.

For example, I once wrote a newsletter article about a retirement home manager, a large man with uncommonly large hands. He had a great laugh and a ready smile, and all of the expected qualifications for running a retirement home with integrity. But his hands became the anchor for the piece and the article ultimately reflected the unsaid statement that residents could rest assured that they were in very good hands while this man was in charge.

If I had not been filtering for small details, I would have missed that opportunity.

Not all details are going to be relevant and I'll caution that not all writers like working with detail – some of us are more comfortable with “big picture” topics. But your goal at this stage is to collect everything you can get your hands on so you can work towards the writing stage, where the more elegant craftsmanship takes place.

Once you have collected all this information, though, what do you do with it?

Step Four: Organize Your Information

So you've determined the purpose of your document, put some thought into who your audience is, gathered much more information than you can humanly use and consumed way too much coffee in the vain effort to forestall information overload. The file facing you is a long dreary litany of unrelated and quite scrambled information and it is sitting there daring you to do something with it.

You think perhaps it is time to answer some emails or call your mother. This is typical writer behavior so you are in good shape for the next stage of writing which is to organize your information. This is not for the faint of heart but I have a dandy little template for wrangling all that information into a form that anybody can use and that will make instant sense to your audience.

So let's just dive in and be grateful for the beauty of cut and paste:

You need four headings:

- Why
- What?
- How? and
- So What?

Starting at the top of your file, go through all of your information and move any information that explains "why" your topic is important to a spot under the "Why" heading. When that's done, do the same thing for information that explains "What" your topic or program actually is and next, "How" it works.

Step back when all that's done and ask if you need to add some point-form explanations of your own to round out the subject matter in each of these three areas. When all that's done, you can tackle the "So What" area, which is really just a summary of why anybody should care – what is the "big dream" your project makes possible or what new potential does it unlock in the world?

If your material doesn't provide satisfactory details, add in the ones you know yourself to be true (with references if necessary).

You will probably be left with a passel of information that doesn't seem to belong anywhere. Check through it again just to be sure none of it answers "Why, What, How or So What" and then take one more look to see if it contains any nuggets of information that might make either a great introduction or a fabulous conclusion. You need both, so if the existing material doesn't help you out, you'll need to invent them yourself.

That means you need to make a new heading just above the "Why" heading and it will read "Introduction" and another new heading just below the "So What" heading which will read "Conclusion." Add in all the information you can think of to these categories and go grab another coffee (or a soothing green tea).

The next step in the planning process is more painful for some people than it is for others: you have to check for what's missing and although it's also a key piece, it's one that is easy to skip.

Step Five: Check for What's Missing

People are sometimes surprised to hear that writing with impact requires a great deal of organization and I think that word “writer” is to blame. It is a highly romantic word. It conjures a soft-focus vision of a dreamy-eyed youth shut away in a cluttered attic room with nothing but a blotchy pen and a tattered notebook for company.

Organization is not romantic.

Good writing has two main components – structure (which the steps in this series have been emphasizing) and style (which we will cover in a future series). While the style imparts personality to your writing, it is the structure that gives it ironclad strength.

Our previous step trailed through the messy but crucial process of organizing information into four key areas (Why? What?, How? and So What?). We tacked on a chunk of introductory information and a chunk of concluding information. Before you start knitting all that information into the glorious creation of a proper document, you have to step back and check for what's missing.

It sounds pretty simple but plenty of people neglect this piece. We know from studies in psychology that some people are highly motivated to solve problems – these people enjoy looking for the holes in their information. Other people find they are most motivated when achieving goals. These people will likely find the process of checking for what's missing to be highly tedious.

Neither tendency is wrong – but if you are highly goal-oriented you may need to force yourself to complete this task. And let's face it, if you have left out an important fact, argument or shade of meaning it's a lot easier to find out before you start writing than to regret the omission at a later date.

To check for what's missing, review the material you've developed and ask yourself if you have left out any key:

- Facts
- People
- Programs or
- Policies

Once you have all the information you need – and it's all nicely organized – you can then start crafting sentences to tie it all together. At this point in my five-step process your document will practically write itself and your job is to then focus on the style issues that will make the piece coherent and expressive.

I find that writing a document this way is something like sculpting a great work of art from a large block of wood. You carefully chip and scrape away the material you don't need and mould the remainder according to your vision of what the piece should be; eventually the final shape emerges. The floor will be littered with messy chips of unused verbiage but the document itself will be something graceful and articulate and, actually, maybe there is something a little romantic in that concept. But the goal is to communicate clearly and that can only happen if you're well organized and focused on ensuring your audience understands what you have to say.