



## MODULE 1 WRITING EFFECTIVELY AT THE WORLD BANK GROUP

Duration: 2 - 3 hours

# What constitutes effective writing at the World Bank?



### Introduction

Welcome to the course!

As an expert in your field, you write reports to help decision makers take appropriate action. The Bank Group's success depends on how well you communicate your ideas and recommendations to others. Ultimately, the success of your writing supports the Bank Group's mission of eradicating poverty.

In this course, you will explore techniques that can help to improve your writing. The course has been developed with a simple underlying idea. Good writing is not a gift that belongs to only a chosen few. Anyone can become a competent writer. You will have to work at it. But writing effectively is a skill that you can develop, improve, and practice with success.

In this course, you will learn about the implications of ineffective writing, and you will learn some new strategies to help you avoid poor practices. Ineffective writing carries two major risks: your readers may not read your reports, or they may get confused and not be able to take appropriate action. In either case, you will lose them, and your success as an effective writer will be impeded.

Throughout the course, you will see quotes about good writing. The quotes were gathered during interviews with Bank Group managers—sector managers, country program coordinators, and others. These quotes show how the principles taught in this course reflect what Bank Group managers say is important in Bank Group writing.

#### QUOTE



*"If a document is not written well—regardless of the  
quality of the analysis—no one will read it."*

—Sector Manager



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## Learning Objectives

Every module in this course has its own objectives that support the [overall course objectives](#).

By the end of this module, you should be able to

- Compare your assumptions about good writing at the World Bank Group with those of managers.
  - Identify strengths and weaknesses in your writing and in samples from the Bank Group based on the core assumptions about effective writing introduced in this module.
  - Identify your goals for this course.
  - Describe the report you will write for this course.
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## Effective Writing at the World Bank Group

Good writing can mean different things to different people. For some it might be a rich, florid style with beautiful imagery and colorful metaphors; for others, it might mimic a favorite writer; still others might prefer writing that is concise and to the point. How do we decide what is good and what is not?

At the World Bank Group, good writing has a specific meaning. It refers to the effectiveness of a document in achieving the writer's purpose—that is, the reason you are writing the document in the first place.

The remainder of Module 1 will explore characteristics of good writing at the Bank Group and will help you formulate your goals for the course.

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### QUOTE



*"Reports must be written to communicate the ideas directly—to influence other people's thinking, not to say everything you know."*

—Sector Manager

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## Compare Views on Writing

During their interviews, Bank Group managers were given a list of writing characteristics and asked to rank the five most important. In this activity, you'll see how your views about writing compare with the views of these Bank Group managers.

From the list below, select only the 5 items you consider most important and rank them (**1** = most important, **5** = lowest of the 5). The characteristics are presented here in alphabetical order. After you rank them, click **Submit**. You will then see the rankings from Bank Group managers. You will also see how the managers ranked the top five skills they believe staff must learn in order to write more effectively.

<b>Analytically sound</b> Well reasoned; arguments supported with evidence	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>"Bottom line on top"</b> Clearly stated main message near the beginning	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Comprehensive</b> Leaves no possible question unaddressed	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Concise</b> No longer than necessary	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Diplomatic tone</b> Language deferential, indirect, follows formula	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Good English</b> Free from significant errors in grammar, spelling, usage, punctuation, etc.	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Hierarchy evident</b> Supporting details clearly distinguished from key thematic ideas	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Objectives clear</b>	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Open-ended</b> Allows reader to interpret meaning	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Paragraph structure</b> Topic sentences carry "story line"; paragraphs are coherent	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Readable style</b> Sentences and word choice allow for easy comprehension	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Recommendations clear</b> Desired actions/recommendations explicitly stated, easy to find	Not in the top 5 ▼
<b>Visual direction and appearance</b> Layout, formatting, and headings support the logic	Not in the top 5 ▼
<input type="button" value="Submit"/>	



## Describe Effective Writing

Throughout this course, you will find a series of activities. Some of these activities will ask you to write something, or to analyze a written example. Others will ask you to analyze some aspects of your own work. Still others—like this first activity—will ask you to reflect on a question and consider your response before continuing.

Open the Reflections File for this activity by clicking on the link below. Answer the question and save the file. You will refer to it later on in the module.



[Reflection 1:  
Describe Effective Writing](#)



## Identify Effective and Ineffective Writing

Now let's analyze effective writing by looking at some samples from the World Bank Group. You will find that the quality of a document is usually determined by more than one factor.

There are two steps to this activity. First you will skim two documents, and then you will analyze one in more depth.

**Step 1:** Skim each of the two sample documents and decide whether it represents effective or ineffective writing. As you read through each document, write down your impressions (jot them down on paper or create a new Word document). You may refer to them for the activity on the next screen.

<a href="#">Sample 1</a> <b>ESAF/SAF E-mail</b> 	<a href="#">Sample 2</a> <b>VP's Visit E-mail</b> 
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Please note that these two samples are e-mails, not reports, but they illustrate principles that apply to longer documents.



## Analyze Characteristics

**Step 2:** Now try a more analytical approach. Choose one of the documents and read it carefully. Consider the document's organization, reader focus, and mechanics as you read.

<a href="#">Sample 1</a> <b>ESAF/SAF E-mail</b> 	<a href="#">Sample 2</a> <b>VP's Visit E-mail</b> 
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In the drop-down menu below, choose which document you are working with. After you choose a document, a table will appear where you can write comments on how effective the document is. After writing your comments and checking your answers, come back to this drop-down menu and choose the other document to comment on it.

Choose which document you are working with:



## Guiding Your Readers

Readers are more likely to have problems taking appropriate action based on a document that has faulty organization or poorly written paragraphs and sentences.

The danger is that readers may make their own assumptions about which points are most important, and these assumptions may not be the same as the writer's. This may result in confusion or misunderstanding and make it harder for the writer to achieve the intended purpose.



*Ask yourself, "Do I want it to be read or to be ignored?"*  
—Sector Manager



## Understand the Creative Reader

Now, **step back and consider the reader's perspective.** Take a few moments and read through the following text.

The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups depending on their makeup. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step; otherwise, you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo any particular endeavor. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many. In the short run this may not seem important, but complications from doing too many can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. The manipulation of the appropriate mechanisms should be self-explanatory, and we need not dwell on it here. At first the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another facet of life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future, but then one never can tell.

Now turn away from your computer for a few minutes. Then click on the **Continue** button below to complete the exercise.

Continue



## Understand the Creative Reader (Exercise)

Try to remember what you read in the passage. What was it about? What were the main points?

Although the passage is not complicated, the researchers who carried out this experiment discovered that most of their study participants found the passage difficult to understand. When participants were informed that the passage was about doing the laundry, they had no trouble recalling the details. Now that you know the subject of the passage, can you remember the details?

Perhaps your reaction was similar to that of the study participants. Readers, including you, may have a hard time understanding and recalling this passage when they are not given a framework. As a result, you are left to interpret the passage without any understanding of the subject even though it is a commonly known activity. When another group of study participants was told ahead of time that the passage was about doing the laundry, comprehension and recall improved significantly.

In the absence of meaning, readers may even construct their own meaning in order to facilitate their understanding. This is known as the condition of the **creative reader**. Linda Flower, who coined the term, describes the creative reader this way:

What happens when readers go about decoding messages and creating meanings? The first thing to notice is that they just don't remember all the things we tell them. Instead of remembering all the details, readers do something much more creative—they draw inferences as they read and use the writer's ideas to form their own concepts. In other words, readers remember not what we tell them, but what they tell themselves.

Flower, Linda, 1993, *Problem-solving strategies for writing*, 4th edition (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).



## Guide the Creative Reader

Now, try the same exercise with the following passage. Its content is similar, but it is on a different subject. Read the passage and then click the **Continue** button.

[Fire Safety Info document](#)



Continue



## Guide the Creative Reader (Exercise)

What is this passage about? What are the main points? You almost certainly did better than in the first example. Possibly this is because you'd been given a little more warning about what you need to do with the passage, but more importantly there are several differences between this passage and the first one. Can you identify them? Let's evaluate the document with the criteria you used on the World Bank Group samples earlier.

Document Organization	
Characteristic	Observations
The purpose is clear.	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Check Answer"/>
The main message appears near the beginning of the document. (i.e., "The bottom line is on top.")	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Check Answer"/>
Information is grouped and labeled to show hierarchy.	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Check Answer"/>
The document has the right content to support the main message.	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Check Answer"/>
Paragraph Structure	
Characteristic	Observations
Each paragraph has one main idea.	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Check Answer"/>
Each paragraph flows logically to support the main idea.	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Check Answer"/>
Sentence Readability	
Characteristic	Observations
Style is concise and tone is appropriate.	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Check Answer"/>
Sentences have correct grammar, punctuation, and other mechanics.	<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Check Answer"/>





## Use Techniques to Guide Your Reader

You have looked at two texts that guide readers—the laundry instructions and the fire safety document. Following are some points that highlight the differences between the two texts.

- Readers need a framework for understanding. Setting expectations helps readers develop the intended framework.
- Our minds naturally seek to order information to help us remember it. Providing the order or pattern of grouping the information will give readers the categories needed for retention.
- People look for information to be arranged into hierarchical patterns. These hierarchies show how ideas in a text are related to each other. For example, major ideas are given great visual prominence, and minor ones are given less prominence.

These principles are in line with what Bank Group managers said they require. In addition to analytical soundness, they want to see the bottom line on top and clear recommendations. The structure and style should support the content of the report.



## Assumptions About Effective Writing

As you have seen so far, effective writing is founded on a few key assumptions. This course is based upon these assumptions; as you work through the course, you will have the opportunity to consider each one in turn. Effective writing occurs at three main levels in any document:

- **At the document level.** A document has a clear purpose and main message—"The bottom line is on top." Documents provide information in manageable sections or groupings, and there is a logical hierarchy of ideas.
- **At the paragraph level.** A document is well reasoned and arguments are supported with evidence. Paragraphs each contain a main idea, and paragraphs work together to serve the main message of the document.
- **At the sentence level.** Words, sentences, and the entire document are concise—no longer than necessary. Sentences employ correct usage and are free from errors in spelling and grammar.

### QUOTE



*"When I get a document that's too long, I always wonder, 'What was it that they couldn't figure out, that they should have put up front?'"*  
—Sector Manager



## Analyze Your own Writing

Now that you have had an opportunity to analyze some writing, it's time to analyze your own work. For this activity, use the writing sample you submitted when you applied to take this course, or use another sample representative of your writing at the Bank Group.

Use the same table of characteristics to evaluate your own writing. Write down some observations about your writing, using the criteria as a guide. What you discover for yourself here will help you articulate what you need to focus on throughout this course.

### REFLECTION



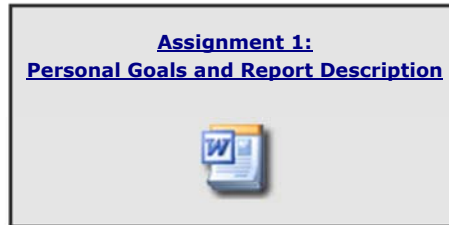
**[Reflection 2:  
Analyze Your own Writing](#)**



## Assignment 1: Personal Goals and Report Description

This assignment requires you to complete two tasks:

1. List your personal goals for the course. If you and your tutor are both aware of your goals, it will be easier to stay focused on them throughout the course. You already started this task as part of your first Reflections File.
2. Describe the report you plan to work on during the course. Please address the report topic, overall function, approximate length, and due date, if known.



Don't worry if your goals or report topic changes after this assignment. The idea is to reflect on your current skills and desired outcomes and to get a conversation started with your tutor.

When you have completed Assignment 1, you will submit it to your tutor by [uploading it in the assignment section in Moodle](#). Your tutor will return the document with feedback in the same place. You can retrieve the comments and see the status of the assignment there.



## Resources and Documents

### Reflections Files

- [Describe Effective Writing](#)
- [Analyze Your Own Writing](#)

### Sample texts

- [ESAF/SAF E-mail](#)
- [VP's Visit E-mail](#)

### Other resources

- [Fire Safety Information for Shady Acres Resort](#)
- [Module 1 Printable \(PDF format\)](#)
- [Background Readings: Report Writing](#)



## Summary

Writing is a core activity at the Bank Group; it is one of the primary means of communicating information, and much of this writing occurs in reports and other structured documents.

At the Bank Group, you are expected to communicate your ideas to others so that they can act on them. Therefore, writing well contributes to your success at the Bank Group and, in turn, to the Bank Group's success in achieving its overall mission of reducing poverty.

The following are characteristics of effective writing at the World Bank Group:

### At the document level

- The purpose is clearly stated.
- The main message is stated up front, close to the beginning of the document—"the bottom line is on top".
- The document is well-reasoned; arguments are supported with evidence.
- Similar information is grouped and labeled and reveals a hierarchy of organization.
- The content supports the main message.

### At the paragraph level

- The text has one idea per paragraph.
- Paragraphs work together to support the main message.

**At the sentence level**

- Spelling, grammar, and style are correct, consistent, and appropriate.
- Tone and style are appropriate.



*"I want to get some sense that the writer cares about  
the basics of making a document readable."  
—Sector Manager*

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