

POLISHING YOUR PROSE

TECH-WRITING TIPS FOR NONFICTION THAT SHINES



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1

INTRODUCTION

Technical writing is (check all that apply):

- Boring and dry
- Done only by engineers and “techy” types
- Completely irrelevant to my nonfiction writing

Did you check them all? Actually, none of them are completely true. Technical writing is, in essence, a set of techniques for organizing and presenting information in a clear, logical, and organized format. By applying these techniques to your nonfiction books, articles, proposals, and queries, you can improve their readability, appeal, and value.

With the proliferation of “info bytes” and Web content, writers need to know how to organize and present information logically, to catch and hold readers’ attention and interest. Clear, clean copy also reflects a professional approach and can help you establish and maintain credibility with audiences, editors, and agents.

WHAT’S A TECHNICAL WRITER, AND WHY WOULD I WANT TO WRITE LIKE ONE?

In Northern California’s “Silicon Valley” where I live, if you throw a tennis ball into a crowd of people, you’ll have a 99 percent chance of hitting a software engineer, test engineer, or marketing manager. If the ball bounces off that person, it will probably hit a technical writer.

Technical writers are regular people who explain to other regular people how to assemble something or use a complicated product to accomplish a task. Many technical writers began their careers in other fields, such as teaching, art gallery management, journalism, and political science. Some, however, come from fields like engineering development or technical support.

Technical writing, which should be called “organized writing” or “clear writing,” is not confined to the high-tech industry. These skills are highly portable and can be used in just about any area of writing. You do not have to be a technical writer to use these techniques to improve your writing.

Here are some projects that you can apply technical writing techniques to:

- Book proposals
- Queries and other business correspondence
- Grants
- Nonfiction books
- Articles
- How-to and self-help books

-
- Cookbooks (an excellent example of a how-to book)
 - Other instructions
 - Indexes

This book describes some of these techniques and gives you examples of how to use them in your writing projects. You'll learn how to:

- Determine your project's audience and scope—to help you know who you're writing to, and what your project will and won't include.
- Organize information into “chunks” that readers can absorb and digest easily.
- Group similar information into bulleted lists, numbered steps, and tables—and know when to use each type.
- Enhance your text with art, and how to do it effectively.
- For books, develop a leak-proof index that points your readers directly to the information they need.
- Edit down to the bone for clear and concise text.
- Find writing careers in which you can use these techniques.

Let's begin!

2

AUDIENCE, SCOPE, AND CHUNKS

What is this project all about? Who will read it? How much information will it include? These are a few of the questions all writers need to ask at the beginning of any writing project. This chapter shows you how to find the answers.

DETERMINING THE AUDIENCE AND SCOPE

Before you begin any project, you should be able to answer two questions:

1. Who is the audience—my readers? Everything you write will be read by a particular person. A book on assembling model trains will be read by people who collect, build, and sell model trains. This is your audience. People who want to learn how to raise chickens won't be interested in your book.

Before you begin any project, state the typical reader of your project. For example, if you're writing a cookbook, describe who will use the book, their level of cooking skills and experience, what kinds of meals they'll want to prepare, and what they will expect from your book. An example of an audience description is: "This cookbook is for single, busy men who know nothing about Italian cooking but want to wow their friends with their culinary flair."

As you develop your audience description, be aware of secondary (and tertiary) audiences. For example, if you're writing a book proposal, your primary audience is the editor or assistant who will read your proposal. Your secondary audience is the person who will buy the book (who might not be the person who'll read it). A tertiary audience is the person to whom the book will be given or read (such as a child or someone unable to read).

2. What is the project's scope—its boundaries? In addition to stating your audience, you should be able to describe the project's content and boundaries. To help you find the answer, ask these questions:

- What is this project?
- What will it include?
- And not include?
- Why am I writing it?

Using the cookbook example again, with all the foods, meals, and cooking techniques available in the world (and more to be developed), which ones will you include and leave out? How much knowledge and experience should the reader have already? (Notice this question includes your audience.) You might describe the scope as: "This cookbook includes recipes for making simple meals unique to southern Italy. It does not offer wine suggestions. It assumes no knowledge of cooking."

Determining your audience and scope before you begin the project helps you stay on track as you develop it. As you write, you'll know how much information to include. For example, if your cookbook assumes no knowledge of cooking, you'll know that you need to tell readers how to peel a potato and grease a pan.

CHUNKING INFORMATION

We humans process information by becoming familiar with the general and moving toward the detail. When we read (or hear) all the information about a topic in the same place, we retain the information more quickly, easily, and completely.

The technique of placing all the information about a topic in one place and having it flow from general to specific is called “chunking.” (Not the most civilized name, but it gets the point across. Another name for chunking is “information mapping,” so take your pick.) One chunk includes introductory, conceptual, how-to, and optional (tips, cautions, and “gotchas”) information about one topic.

The easiest way to organize information from general to detailed is by using graduated section headings, with content to match. The following is an example of a chunk in our cookbook. (By the way, this is a great outline—imagine how easily you could add the content.)

- Vegetables
 - A History of Vegetables
 - Types of Vegetables
 - Cooking Vegetables
 - Boiling
 - Sautéing
 - Roasting
 - Grilling
 - Deep Frying
 - Gotchas for Cooking Vegetables
 - Storing Vegetables
 - (and so on)

Note: Chunking is different from the journalistic technique of the “inverted pyramid” (providing the urgent, immediate information first and then adding extraneous information), because chunking starts by introducing a subject, provides context, and then describes the details.

For example, think of how you might describe an address to someone traveling here from Mars, and you can understand the difference:

Earth
North America
USA
Massachusetts
Suffolk County
Boston
02026
325 North Street
Apartment 15
Jody Hamster

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

Try these techniques on your current nonfiction project. First, describe your audience and scope. Then, think about how to organize the information into chunks. Have fun, and happy writing!

3

ORGANIZING WITH LISTS, STEPS, AND TABLES

All your brilliant ideas, facts, figures, and solutions will go unread, unnoticed, and unappreciated if readers can't find them. In this chapter, you'll learn how to organize your information into lists, steps, and tables, to improve your readers' comprehension and increase their chances of success. One you get the hang of using lists, steps, and tables, you'll never write the same again!

CLUSTERING INFORMATION IN LISTS

A *list* organizes complex information into one cohesive unit. Look at this recipe for preparing spaghetti:

To cook the spaghetti, fill a large pot with cold water, and put it on the stove. Turn the burner to high. (To boil the water faster, put the lid on the pot.) When the water boils, open the spaghetti package and put the spaghetti into the water. Leave the lid off, and cook the spaghetti in furiously boiling water until it's done. (For firm spaghetti, boil for 7 minutes. For softer spaghetti, boil for 9 minutes.) Put a colander in the sink. When the spaghetti is done, take the pot off the burner and drain the spaghetti in the colander. (Remember to turn off the burner.) Then rinse the spaghetti. If you're using the spaghetti in a hot dish (for example, with sauce), rinse it under hot water. If you're using the spaghetti in a cold dish (like a salad), rinse it under cold water.

This paragraph explains the task correctly. But if your reader's guests are due in three minutes, she's still wearing workout clothes, and the dog just got sick, she'd have a hard time following directions in this dense paragraph.

This recipe would read better in a list. There are two basic types of lists:

- *Ordered* lists (steps), for items readers must do or understand sequentially. Precede items in ordered lists with numbers or letters. For example:

In an emergency, follow these steps:

1. Clean the floor.
2. Change your clothes.
3. Greet your guests with a smile.

- *Unordered lists*, for items readers can do or understand in any order. Unordered lists often contain options or choices. For example:

You can:

- Offer appetizers
- Tie on aprons and ask for help
- Order out

Although bullets (stars, dashes, or other symbols) normally precede items in unordered lists, you can use numbers. Notice how numbers verify the introduction in this example:

There are three ways to know your guests have arrived:

1. You hear voices outside
2. You're still wearing sweats
3. Your dog looks green

Note: When you mention a number, be sure your list includes that many items.

TRYING IT OUT

Rewrite the recipe paragraph into lists. Your results might look like this:

To cook spaghetti:

1. Fill a large pot with cold water.
2. Put the pot on the stove, and turn the burner to high.

To boil the water faster, put the lid on the pot.

3. When the water boils, open the spaghetti package and put the spaghetti into the water.

Leave the lid off.

4. Cook the spaghetti in furiously boiling water until it's done.

- For firm spaghetti, boil for 7 minutes.
- For softer spaghetti, boil for 9 minutes.

5. Put a colander in the sink.

6. When the spaghetti is done, take the pot off the burner, and drain the spaghetti in the colander.

Remember to turn off the burner.

7. Rinse the spaghetti.

- If you're using the spaghetti in a hot dish (for example, with sauce), rinse under hot water.
- If you're using the spaghetti in a cold dish (for example, in a salad), rinse under cold water.

Readers can now follow each step, stay oriented, learn details, and choose among options.

ORGANIZING WITH TABLES

Another way to organize information is with a *table*. A table contains columns and rows, which readers scan to find what they need.

Use tables to:

- **Provide details about general information in a step.** For example:

4. Adjust the sauce to taste.

To make your sauce	Do this
Thinner, more watery	Add water or a can of diced tomatoes.
Thicker	Cook it longer to reduce the liquid. Or, add a cup of grated carrots or zucchini.
More savory	Add a can of tomato paste, salt, and a clove of garlic.
Sweeter	Add sugar.

- **Define glossary terms.** For example:

Term	Definition
Marinara sauce	A tomato-based sauce without meat
Meatball	A mixture of ground meat, bread crumbs, eggs, and seasonings, shaped into a ball
Spaghetti	Pasta formed into long, thin, strands
Parmesan cheese	A hard cheese, often grated or shredded

- **Solve problems.** For example:

Problem	Solution
The sauce burns in the pot.	Add a few tablespoons of white vinegar, or a peeled potato. (Take the potato out before serving.)
The meatballs are tasteless.	Sprinkle soy sauce or chili sauce on them.
The spaghetti is one mushy clump of pasta.	Dump it, and boil a new batch. Stir the pasta as it boils.
The Parmesan cheese came in a block, not a can.	Grate the cheese.

- **Catalog information.** For example:

Name of Food	Ingredients
Spaghetti	Flour, water, egg
Marinara sauce	Tomatoes, water, onions, garlic, basil, oregano, sage, bay leaf
Meatballs	Ground meat, bread or cracker crumbs, egg, diced onions, oregano, sage, basil
Parmesan cheese	Skim milk, cheese culture, salt

STRUCTURING INSTRUCTIONS

When you write instructions for a task, here's a great way to organize them:

1. **Introduction.** A paragraph or two that describes what readers are about to do. Also, state what they need to know or have done before doing this task.
2. **The steps.** Go all out here with your lists and tables. Include one complete action in each step, and include up to seven steps for each task. (Readers become disoriented after seven.) If your task requires more than seven steps, break it into two.
3. **Notes, tips, warnings, and cautions.** Place extraneous information after the steps, unless readers need these details earlier.

Keep these points in mind:

- You can use lists within tables, and you can insert tables within lists.
- Use *parallel construction* (same grammatical structure) within a list or table. In other words, don't make the first item a full sentence, the next a fragment, and the third a question.
- Follow this general rule: if you have more than three items, use a table.

ABOUT STYLE

You might wonder, "What capitalization and punctuation should I use in lists and tables?" This question plagues every editorial group at least once a week, and here are some answers:

- Ask the editor you're working with for a copy of the house *style guide*. A style guide is a document that describes the preferred word usage, capitalization, punctuation, grammar choices, and formatting options to use when you write for that house. If you follow their style, you'll be the answer to your editor's prayers.
- Create your own style guide, and follow it consistently. (Until someone—an editor—tells you to use a different style.) For help, buy a copy of *AP Stylebook* and *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

Now that you're an expert, try reorganizing your own paragraphs into lists, steps, and tables.

4

USING ART EFFECTIVELY

When integrated correctly, art enhances the text, and text illustrates the art. Working together, art and text become one dynamic duo.

Have you ever tried to explain something to another person and, after several frustrating and unsuccessful attempts, said, “Let me draw you a picture?,” and suddenly the proverbial light went on?

Can you remember one illustration from a beloved childhood storybook that still evokes the essence of the story?

When you ask for driving directions, do you prefer the text, the map, or both?

Art can be a powerful enhancement and learning tool for your readers. This chapter explains how to combine art and text to add value to your words and help your readers easily grasp what you want to convey.

STROLLING THROUGH THE GALLERY

You can use several types of art in your text, and each type serves a particular purpose. This section describes the most common types of art, suggests the best places to use them, and includes examples.

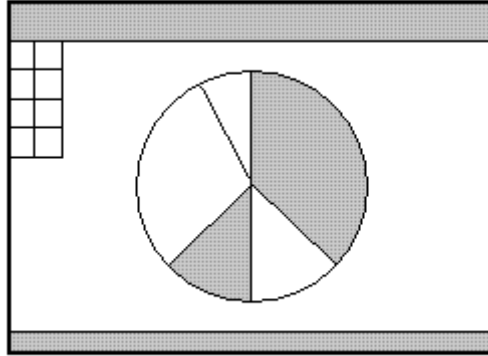
- **Photographs** provide readers with accurate depictions of people, places, things, and events. When you include a photograph, be sure to identify it correctly, either in the surrounding text or in the caption (see “Using callouts and captions,” below). Spell the names of people and places correctly and, if appropriate, include dates and other important facts.



Marilyn at the beach

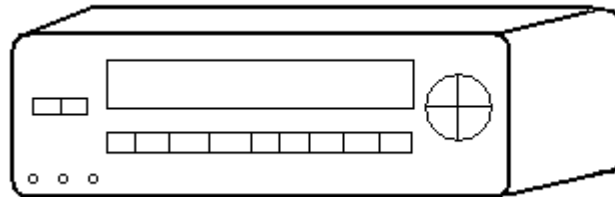
- **Screen shots** appear liberally in software user guides to show readers the state of a computer screen during a process or task. As readers follow the steps, they can compare their computer screen with the screen shot in the user guide to see if they’re doing the task correctly. If they aren’t, they can correct the error before getting into more trouble. You can use a full screen shot,

or crop the file to highlight a particular portion of the screen. Place screen shots where readers will need to see them—not too early and not too late in the steps. To help readers fully understand the point of a screen shot, use callouts, a caption, or both.



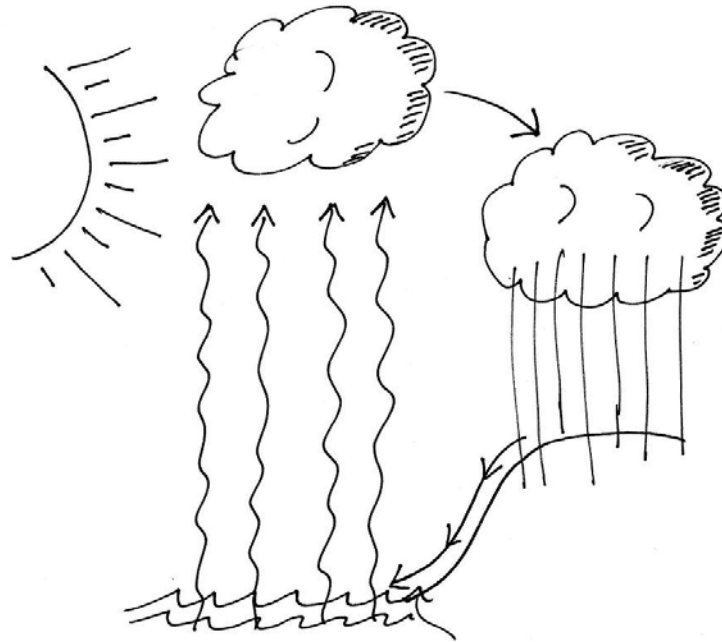
Your chart now looks like this

- An **architectural drawing** provides an accurate, detailed rendition of an actual item. (Think of a drawing of a computer, or a dresser or table after assembly.) Unlike a photograph, which shows everything about the item, an architectural drawing highlights only the parts your readers need to be concerned with. To increase the drawing's usefulness, include callouts, a caption, or both with an architectural drawing.



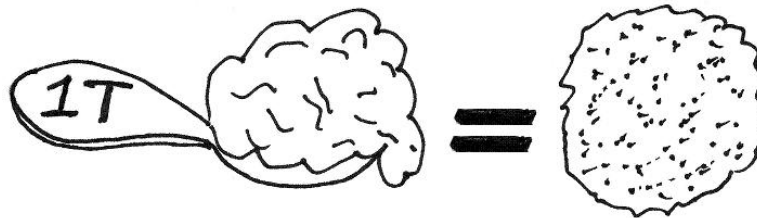
- **Conceptual art** illustrates an idea or concept and can take many different forms. Often, concept art distills a complex idea, concept, task, or process into a simple, graphical metaphor that readers can grasp immediately. It can be a spare, single drawing of an idea, or a combination of photographs and architectural drawings that together explain an entire process.

Here's an example of conceptual art illustrating the evaporation-precipitation cycle:

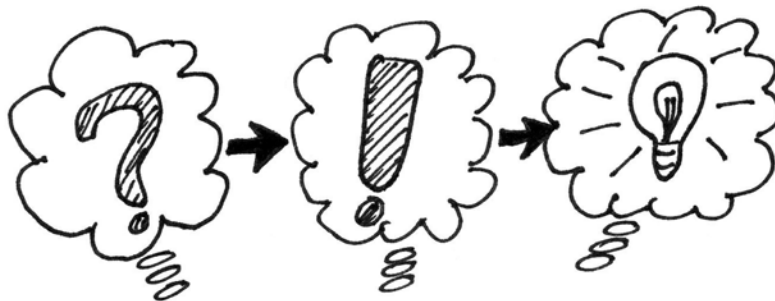


Notice how the conceptual drawing in the following example emphasizes the information about making meatballs:

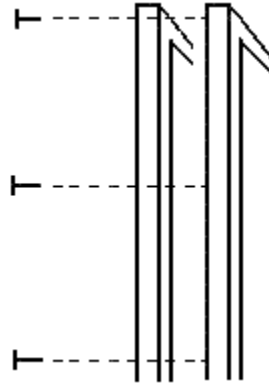
Measure one rounded tablespoon of the meatball mixture for each meatball.



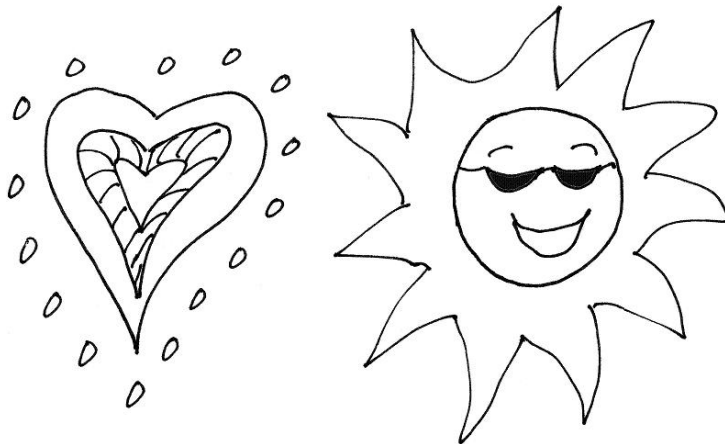
This conceptual drawing illustrates how ideas are sparked:



- **Blow-out diagrams** are a type of conceptual art that shows how something (such as a picture frame) is assembled. These drawings get their name from the exaggerated amount of space shown between each part—as if they’ve been “blown out” or “blown apart” from each other. Readers can study a blow-out diagram and understand how the various parts, including hardware, fit together.



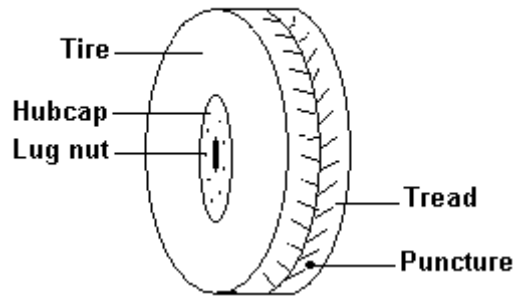
- **Decorative art** often appears in gift books and books for younger readers. Decorative art breaks up chunks of text and complements and enhances a book’s theme or personality. Hearts, flowers, birds, butterflies, stars, crosses, praying hands, shapes, festoons, and patterns are just a few examples of decorative art.



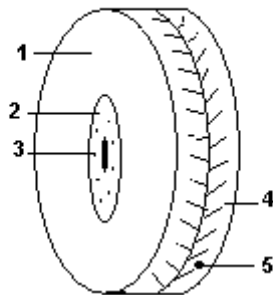
USING CALLOUTS AND CAPTIONS

To describe the parts or the whole of an illustration, use callouts and captions. You do not have to include both in an illustration.

- **Callouts** are brief (one to five words) labels or descriptions of each part of an illustration you want to emphasize, or “call out,” to readers. You can place callout text close to the part of the illustration it describes (connected by a callout line), like this:

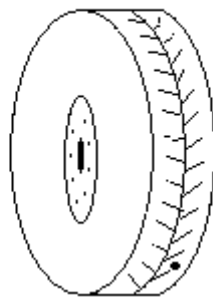


Or you can place the callout text in a table, and refer to corresponding numbers that you place in the illustration. A table is useful when the callouts are longer than five words, or when the callout text will be localized or translated for international audiences. (If the text is part of the graphic, the illustration will have to be recreated to display the translated callout text.)



1	Tire
2	Hubcap
3	Lug nut
4	Tread
5	Puncture

- A **caption** is a sentence or phrase that appears above or below an illustration to describe or label the art as a whole, like this:



Tire with a puncture

Note: Use an accepted or consistent style for capitalization and punctuation in callouts and captions throughout your manuscript.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

Take a few pages from a manuscript you're working on. How and where you could enhance the text with art? What types would work best?

As you begin to incorporate art into your text, keep the following points in mind:

- Place the art in your text where it will help readers best. For example, place a photo of the Tour d'Eiffel directly below or beside the paragraph that mentions it.
- For conceptual art that uses icons or symbols, include a key (either in the illustration or as part of the caption).
- To identify people in a photograph, use either of these standard directions: front row first, left to right; or clockwise, left to right.
- You do not have to draw the art or take the photographs. Find an illustrator or photographer to do that work. Most often, the publisher hires an illustrator, so be sure to describe the illustrations accurately, or provide sketches of your ideas.
- If you're working with a publication, publishing house, or printer, ask how you should deliver art files with your manuscript. If you're designing, authoring, and publishing the piece yourself, read the user guides or online Help of your software programs to learn how to create and incorporate graphics files into the manuscript.

Did you notice that this chapter is shorter than the previous two? What's that they say about a picture painting a thousand words? Happy sketching!

5

CREATING A LEAK-PROOF INDEX

My husband is a geek, and I say that with much love and pride. His decision-making process is logical; his car, desk, and briefcase are organized; and his speech is as precise as a CHP officer's radar gun. Whenever my beloved geek browses the nerd books in the computer store, he picks one from the shelf, turns immediately to the index, and searches for a term he expects to see there. If he can't find it within fifteen seconds, the book goes back on the shelf. (Good thing he didn't choose his wife that way.) "A book is only as good as its index," he proclaims.

The problem is that most writers run for the hills when it's time to create the index. Many view the index as either a convoluted mystery to which they don't have a clue or an odious task that must be done before the book can go to print. The result is often a poorly constructed index, done at the last minute, which omits many necessary entries, is inconsistent in depth and style, contains book-specific terms that readers aren't familiar with (and therefore can't tell whether they should pay attention to), or contains only enough entries to call itself an index.

This is what I call a "leaky index," because it's full of holes and unable to carry the body of the book. If readers can't find what they're looking for in the index, the book isn't going to help them as it should.

So, what many writers consider the index to be the "end" of the book, I call the index.

THE BRAINS OF THE BOOK

Let's say it's five o'clock and your brand-new in-laws, who live in the next state, call and announce they decided to "take a little drive" and are now roaring up the freeway, twenty miles from your house. Thank goodness the house is clean and you're wearing your skinny jeans. Ever the optimist, you decide to wow them with your culinary skills, so you pull out your new, 500-page cookbook from Auntie Ann and look up a time-tested favorite, roast leg of lamb.

You start by flipping through the pages. No luck. Then you go to the table of contents. As the clock on the microwave blinks away the seconds, warning you of the impending relatives, you wonder if there's another way to look up the information you desperately need. With your brain stuck in neutral, the book falls from your hands to the floor, open face-down. You pick it up, turn it over, and see an alphabetical list of everything in that book—organized by category and then details. So, you flip to the *L* list, find "Leg of lamb," and it says, "See Lamb, roast leg of." Aha! You scan up the page a couple of inches and find the entry, which directs you to the page that contains the recipe.

You would think this story ends like this: two hours later, the in-laws, bellies full, give your new husband the thumbs-up, and husband winks at you from the other end of the table. But this isn't the '60s—and you forgot lamb in your last online grocery order. The index still saved the day, however, when you saw the entry "dining out" and took everyone to your favorite restaurant.

CREATING THE LEAK-PROOF INDEX

Creating the leak-proof index is easy—and, yes, enjoyable—when you have a process. The following information gives you the basic process for creating a leak-proof index (or, in my husband’s case, a “geek-proof” index) for a book.

Note: The following information assumes you know how to use indexing software, such as the tools provided in many common word-processing applications. Other indexing applications work outside the book file. (You can also create an index “the old-fashioned way,” but who would want to do that? If the pagination changes, all the page numbers in the index have to be rechecked.) If you don’t know the mechanics of using your indexing software, learn them. Read the user’s guide, study the online Help topics, or take a training class.

BUILD THE MASTER LIST

1. If you’re indexing a book that someone else wrote, read the book to understand its contents, running concepts, and underlying themes. If you wrote the book, make a list of these things about the book.
2. Using this information, create a “high-level” list of concepts. An index is like a database—or a filing cabinet filled with folders. The index is the cabinet, and each folder in the drawers is a category of information. Inside each folder are the details about that category. Your high-level concepts are the file folders. They will become your master list of first-level entries in your index.
 - Make one entry for each concept—don’t think of a hundred different ways to say the same thing—yet. For example, “Stew beef” is fine for now—not “Stew beef” and “Beef, for stew.” Save that for later.
 - Include nouns and verbs in the high-level list. Choose a style for nouns (singular or plural? I prefer plural—“Sauces” sounds more like a category than “Sauce”). Choose a style for verbs. (I prefer the gerund form of verbs—“Frying” can include more information than the imperative form “Fry.”) Don’t include commonly used verbs, such as “adding,” “stirring,” or “changing.” Instead, add these verbs as details or second-level entries (see “Create sub-entries,” below), which is how most readers will search for these “soft” terms, anyway.
 - After you begin indexing, you will add to and delete from this list, but this gives you an idea of the main points you need to include.

For example, your master list looks like this:

- appetizers
- apples
- allspice
- baking
- bread
- bananas
- cakes
- cucumbers
- desserts
- eggs
- frying
- glazes
- gelatin

CREATE SUB-ENTRIES

1. Good start! Now, look at your master list, and under each item, make a list of the details you know about each first-level entry. These details will become your second-level (or sub-) entries. For example, under “Frying,” write everything you know that the book contains about frying, such as fish, potatoes, oil temperature, safety precautions, vegetables, turkey, chicken, pan frying, deep frying, and so on.

Now your list looks like this:

- appetizers
 - about
 - chips and salsa
 - crudités
 - mini-quiches
 - parmesan puffs
- apples
 - about
 - baked
 - casseroles with
 - Gala
 - Golden Delicious
 - pies
 - types of
- allspice
- baking
 - about
 - apples
 - oven temperature
 - pans for
 - pies

2. Decide how many levels of index entries you want the index to include. The standard maximum is three levels. There are benefits and drawbacks of two-level and three-level indexes.

Two-level indexes are easier to keep readers oriented—the deeper they go, the harder is it for readers to remember what the category they’re searching. A drawback of two levels is that the indexer must be very precise with wording the second-level entries.

A benefit of three levels is that they make the pages easier to scan, and a drawback is that readers can lose their bearings from page-to-page and might find a third-level entry that’s the same as another sub-entry for an entirely different category.

3. If your index will have three levels of sub-entries, repeat the previous step for each second-level entry.

TAG ENTRIES AND GENERATE THE BASIC INDEX

1. With your list in hand, open the book file and start indexing from front to back.
 - As you index, you will add to and delete from the list. That’s fine—the list is only a guide.
 - Index the foreword, preface, and introduction sections, and the text in all chapters and appendixes. Include tables, charts, and illustrations. Do not index the copyright, dedication, contents, cover, glossary, notes, and bibliography pages.
2. Generate (run) the index, and see what you have. Pretty neat, huh? Plan to do lots of editing. Note additions, deletions, and changes. Keep the style consistent throughout the index. Go back into the index and make those changes. Then run the index again. Continue doing this until you have a solid index.
3. Using the entries you have, think of other ways readers will look up the term. This is their “point of entry” into your index. For example, in addition to the first-level entry:

allspice
 cumin
 curry powder
 oregano

Add these entries:

spices
 allspice
 cumin
 curry powder
 oregano

4. Do the same for second- (and third-) level entries.

5. Generate the index again. Then, make sure that similar first-level entries have the same or similar sub-entries. For example, make sure beef, chicken, and pork all have entries for baking, roasting, barbecuing, and so on, as applicable.

FINE-TUNE THE INDEX

1. Add cross-references. These are the *See* and *See also entries*. For example, to make sure readers who look for “Gala apples” see all the information about apples, construct the entry like this:

Gala apples, 157
See also apples

2. Make another list of terms that readers might search for that aren’t included in this book. For example, if your book uses the term “fry pan” but not “griddle pan,” add “griddle pan” to the index, and include a *See* cross-reference. You can construct the entries in either of these ways:
 - Direct readers to the entry for the books term:
griddle pan. *See* fry pan
 - Tell readers the term this book uses, and include the page number for the entry:
griddle pan (fry pan), 486
3. Generate the index again, edit it until it’s perfect, and then celebrate. You just created a leak-proof book index!

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

Now that you have the basics, you can fine-tune your indexing skills by reading books and taking classes on the subject. There are several organizations for professional indexers and those interested in the profession, including the American Society of Indexers (www.asindexing.org).

Happy indexing!

6

EDITING DOWN TO THE BONES

Once you have finished writing your article or book, you'll need to edit it before submitting it to the editor or publisher. Remember what you learned in kindergarten and send in your cleanest copy. That way, you increase your chances of being invited to send another piece. And, it marks you as a strong writer and a professional.

Editing is done in several passes. If you look for certain things in each pass, your chances of catching all the problems will be greater than if you try to look for every problem in one pass. Do at least three edits: the first for layout and mechanics; the second for organization and flow; and the third for miscellaneous pieces of the manuscript.

The following checklists show you what to look for in each editing pass.

PREPARATION

- Use the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the style guide recommended by the publisher, or client. If you're editing a manuscript for a Christian publisher, also use *A Christian Writer's Manual of Style*.
- Set the manuscript aside for a few days, to create emotional and mental distance from it. Your editor (that would be you) will be able to look at the copy with a more objective eye after a few days' vacation.
- Choose how you want to edit—online or from printed copy. If you choose online and you use Microsoft Word as your word processing program, consider editing with the Track Changes tool. You can make your editorial changes and then decide later if you want to keep each one or revert to the original version.
- If you mark on hard copy, learn proofreaders' marks.
- Become familiar with common misspellings and commonly misused words (for example, ensure and insure; affect and effect; lie and lay).

FIRST PASS: LAYOUT AND MECHANICS

- Make sure the components of a book manuscript are in the correct order, usually:
 1. Title page
 2. Copyright page
 3. Epigraph
 4. Dedication page
 5. Acknowledgements page
 6. Table of contents (TOC)

7. Foreword
8. Preface
9. Introduction
10. Chapters
11. Appendixes
12. Glossary
13. Bibliography
14. Endnotes
15. Index

- Make sure the page format is correct—first-line tabs are indented correctly, and the top, bottom, and side margins are correct. Check that line spacing is correct.
- Check that headers and footers are correct on each page, each page has a page number, and all pages are included.
- Check that page breaks and section breaks are properly placed, with no widows or orphans.
- Use your software program’s search-and-replace feature to replace two spaces with one; change two hyphens (--) to one em dash (—), and three dots with an ellipsis, according to your style guide.
- Change straight quotation marks to “curly” ones (except when straight are called for), and make sure all quotation marks point in the proper direction.
- Turn on hidden characters and look for any strange formatting characters that snuck in (for example, extraneous tabs, line breaks, or page breaks), and correct them.

SECOND PASS: ORGANIZATION AND FLOW

- Read through the manuscript for overall flow, organization, structure, and style. Does it make sense? Is everything in logical order? Does the content follow the outline and TOC?
- Perform spelling and grammar checks, but don’t rely solely on your software program’s tools.
- Make sure names and other proper nouns are spelled correctly and properly capitalized and punctuated.
- Check that chapter titles and section headings are descriptive, so that readers will grasp the content as they scan.
- Make sure headings use a consistent format and are capitalized correctly.
- Read for texture and rhythm in sentences. Break up long sentences and combine shorter ones. Break up long paragraphs to improve readability.
- Make sure sentences contain proper punctuation.

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- Change passive sentence construction to active.
 - Change negative phrasing to positive wherever possible. Instead of telling readers what not to do, tell them what to do.
 - Remove all unnecessary words. Remove redundancy by combining sentences with similar meaning.
 - Replace complicated words with simple ones, and remove jargon.
 - Make sure each open parenthesis has a corresponding close parenthesis, and vice versa. Check also for brackets and double quotation marks.
 - Make sure the serial comma is used correctly according to your style guide.
 - Use correct rules for numbers and digits, according to the style guide.
 - Remove exclamation points, except where absolutely necessary.
 - Make sure that items in tables and bulleted lists are all consistent, that the grammar has parallel construction, and is properly punctuated.
 - Make sure steps are in proper order. “Keystroke” (test) steps to make sure they’re correct.
 - Make sure cross-references point to the correct place.
 - Change Latin abbreviations to words. For example, use “in other words” instead of “i.e.”
 - To keep the text gender neutral, change singular forms of pronouns to plural wherever possible. Use male and female names in examples.
 - Think internationally and inclusively. If you’re writing to an international audience, use international examples. Avoid examples about baseball, hot dogs, Christmas during winter (half the world celebrates Christmas in summer), and so on. Use names from different languages and countries. Consider including metric measurements.

THIRD PASS: MISCELLANEOUS PIECES

- TOC: check that each heading that should be in the TOC is there, and that page numbers are correct.
- Illustrations: check that illustrations are in the correct place and that they are aligned correctly. Make sure that the correct caption and callouts apply to the illustration and they’re spelled and punctuated correctly.
- Sidebars: check that sidebar text is aligned correctly. Also make sure the text is spelled and punctuated correctly.
- Footnotes and endnotes: make sure that one appears for each marker in the text, and that they’re spelled, formatted, and punctuated correctly. Footnotes appear at the bottom of the page, and endnotes appear at the end of the book or article.

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- Bibliography: check that bibliographical notes are spelled and formatted correctly and that they're in alphabetical order.
 - Make sure all referenced sources are correct and valid. Make sure URLs (Web site addresses) are correct.
 - Index: make sure that all entries are in correct alphabetical order, and that page numbers, font, spelling, and punctuation are correct.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

Use the steps above to edit something you've been working on.

Happy editing!

7

CAREERS IN WRITING

In the previous chapters, you learned how to:

- Define the scope and audience for your writing projects
- Organize your information into chapters and major sections
- Group similar information into lists, steps, and tables
- Incorporate art into your writing projects to enhance the text and help readers grasp the concepts quickly and easily
- Develop a “leak-proof” index to help readers find what they need to know fast
- Edit your work in layers, to make the right changes at the right time

All this information has given you a great foundation to “polish your prose” and elevate your writing to a new level of professionalism. Armed with these new skills, you can find work that pays you to be the expert writer and editor that you are. The rest of this chapter describes a handful of these writing and editing jobs. (I have written several of the descriptions from personal experience, and the rest come from interviews with other people.)

A few notes about pay rates: all rates are given in U.S. dollars, and they all depend on the writer’s experience and the job’s geographical location.

ADVERTISING COPYWRITER

Description: Writes advertising copy for a variety of clients’ products, services. Meets with the account executive, creative director, and artist to better understand the client’s needs, and then develops a creative strategy to meet those needs. A copywriter might write for print, as well as other media (such as radio, TV, and the Web).

Education/training: Most copywriters don’t come out of a specialized program in advertising but are liberal arts majors, including English majors. An ability to write clearly and persuasively, and think “outside of the box” are the most desirable qualities.

Average pay rate: \$42K–\$60K annually.

CORPORATE OR MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS WRITER

Description: Produces documents for print and the Web about the organization to employees, clients, and customers. Includes in-house and customer newsletters, articles, journals, and Web content, press releases, corporate backgrounders and white papers. Prepares technical overviews of products and services. Works with copyeditors, designers, production specialists for accuracy of

information and consistency of style. Establishes relationships with press, trade, and industry contacts.

Education/training: Degree in journalism, marketing, English, or communications, or experience in a technical writing or editing or marketing communications environment.

Average pay rate: \$50K annually.

EDUCATION WRITER

Description: Writes theme- and subject-based workbooks, reading books, and other materials for K-12 classroom use on work-for-hire basis. Requires curiosity, love of teaching, love of research, and the ability to explain concepts in pictures and text.

Education/training: Knowledge and/or experience in subject, degree and/or experience in education, teaching, or curriculum development, knowledge of education standards.

Average pay rate: Varies by publisher/packager.

PROPOSAL WRITER, NEW BUSINESS/BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT (CORPORATE)

Description: Develops and writes new business proposals to potential clients based on client/customers' requests and needs. Also develops and writes contract proposals for new clients/customers. Commonly works in the financial planning and investment, insurance, and health care industries. This job is detail oriented and deadline driven. It requires an understanding of the customer. Also requires good people skills, meticulous research skills, ability to translate complex facts and statistics into understandable language.

Education/training: B.A. degree, or equivalent experience, in related industry. Excellent persuasive, expository, and technical writing skills. Excellent research skills. Knowledge of industry and RFP (request for proposal) database use and management.

Average pay rate: \$45K–\$100K annually.

PROPOSAL WRITER, GRANTS (NONPROFIT)

Description: Develops and writes proposals to solicit funds for projects or services provided by organization. Commonly works in education, religious, and volunteer-based organizations. Researches funding sources and is familiar with various organizations and foundations that administer grant funds. This job is detail oriented and deadline driven. It requires an understanding of the customer. Also requires good people skills, meticulous research skills, ability to translate complex facts and statistics into understandable language.

Education/training: B.A. degree, or equivalent experience, in related industry. Excellent persuasive, expository, and technical writing skills. Excellent research skills. Knowledge of industry.

Average pay rate: \$25K–\$45K annually.

GREETING CARD WRITER

Description: Writes messages, poems, and verse for greeting cards. May suggest art. Develops ideas according to the publisher's guidelines; works with editors. Requires patience, persistence, love of words, and the ability to work independently.

Education/training: No formal education needed, but an understanding of how to write a personal message with a command of language is required. For inspirational card writers, understand the quoted Bible verse in context.

Average pay rate: \$25–\$100 per idea. Sometimes additional payment if you develop the card's graphic design.

PUBLIC RELATIONS CONSULTANT

Description: Working for the client or employer, identifies story ideas for the trade, business and general press. Researches, writes, or edits articles, press releases/fact sheets, backgrounders; follows up press releases with press contacts, tracks news stories and company profiles in the press; develops relationships with press. Consultants may also do strategic planning, writing and supervising video productions. Requires good listening skills, flexibility, resourcefulness, the ability to work independently, make good recommendations for the organization, and be businesslike, professional, and responsive to customers' needs.

Education/training: B.A. in journalism, communication, or marketing. Accreditation through a professional organization like PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) is extremely helpful.

Average pay rate: \$100–\$250 hourly.

RESUME WRITER

Description: Writes and edits clients' resumes and cover letters, from scratch or using existing material. Requires strong business writing skills with a marketing focus (because a resume sells the applicant), good people skills, an ability to turn excellent product around quickly.

Education/training: Degree or background in journalism, technical writing, English, or communications. Experience or background in marketing, finance, advertising, law, IT, legal, human resources, military, or business helpful.

Average pay rate: \$20–\$25 hourly.

TECHNICAL WRITER

Description: Writes user manuals, instructions, technical articles, reports, and brochures for documentation for products and services to internal and external customers of an organization. Conducts research to gather material. May coordinate and/or suggest graphics to enhance text. Plans and develops project schedule and needs. Is familiar with industry terminology, practices, and procedures with a particular field. Follows or develops processes, guidelines, and procedures to complete projects. Works with editors, production specialists, engineers, marketing specialists,

product testers. May do indexing. Must be organized, flexible, curious, patient, have excellent writing, editing, time-management, and people skills.

Education/training: B.A. in technical writing, English, journalism, education, training, or communications, or experience. Skilled in authoring and editing software (Adobe FrameMaker, Macromedia Dreamweaver, Adobe Acrobat, etc.), knowledge of HTML/XML. Knowledge of particular industries and technologies also helpful.

Average pay rate: \$40K–\$100K annually.

FREELANCE EDITOR

Description: Performs developmental editing, line- and copy-editing, and proofreading on manuscripts prior to publishing. May also do indexing. Clients can be authors, publishers, or corporations. Requires excellent time management and project management skills, good people skills, attention to detail, and a desire for excellence.

Education/training: Excellent editing and proofreading skills; knowledge of how story works (for fiction); excellent knowledge of language and grammar.

Average pay rate: Proofreading: \$20–\$35 hourly; Basic copyediting: \$25–\$50 hourly; In-depth line-by-line copyediting: \$30–\$75 hourly; Developmental/content editing: \$30–\$100 hourly; Ghostwriting/coauthoring rates: vary.

MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS EDITOR

Description: Edits brochures, white papers, data sheets, Web copy, anything else the client company creates. Edits for errors in punctuation, grammar, and style, for consistent voice, and that style adheres to company's standards. May provide developmental editing, copyediting, line editing, and proofreading of project at different stages of production cycle. Requires excellent grammar skills (current) and people skills, ability to be tactful, flexible, detail oriented.

Education/training: Requires specialized training through classes and certificate programs (many colleges and extension programs offer them), and on-the-job training.

Average pay rate: As freelancer, \$30–\$75 hourly; \$52K annually.

PROOFREADER

Description: Proofreads, reviews, and edits materials for accurate use of grammar and content. Corrects grammatical, typographical, or compositional errors in the original copy. This job is detail oriented and deadline driven.

Education/training: A.A. degree or equivalent experience; excellent spelling and grammar skills; knows proofreading standards. Knowledge of the subject matter or industry is helpful.

Average pay rate: As freelancer, \$2–\$4 per page; \$25–\$30 hourly; \$36K annually.

TECHNICAL EDITOR

Description: Edits technical documents produced by technical writers at all stages of development. Checks for adherence to corporate and department/product style guidelines, and performs line- and copy-edits. May also check for language that international readers will identify with (after text is translated). Requires excellent grammar skills (current) and people skills, ability to be tactful, flexible, detail oriented.

Education/training: Experience or certificate in editing, with on-the-job training. Degree in journalism, communications, or English helpful. Particular technical knowledge not required.

Average pay rate: For freelancers, \$30–\$75 hourly; \$75K annually.

INDEXER

Description: Creates an index from electronic manuscript or typeset page proofs provided by the client (author, publisher, or corporation).

Education/training: No formal degree required, but expertise in the subject matter is desirable. Requires excellent language skills, ability to focus on details, accuracy, excellent organization skills, and excellent time management skills. Requires curiosity, accuracy, attention to detail, ability to work independently and be disciplined.

Average pay rate: \$25–\$30 hourly, up to \$50K annually.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

If you would like more information about finding jobs in which you can use your writing and editing skills, please send me an e-mail at marilyn@rivergem.com, and I'll send you a bibliography of books and other resources.

I wish you all the best as you develop and polish your gift of working with words.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marilyn C. Hilton has published numerous articles, devotions, short stories, and poems in literary and consumer magazines such as *Decision*, *Women's Touch/Leader's Touch*, *Spirit-Led Writer*, *Bay Area Baby*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Reed*, and was a columnist for the online magazine *Spirit-Led Writer*, offering information and advice on writing nonfiction. She has also published two books for preteen girls, *The Christian Girl's Guide to Your Mom* and *It's All About Dad & Me*, and has contributed to several anthologies. Marilyn enjoys speaking and teaching at workshops, schools, meetings, and retreats.

Marilyn holds a M.A. in English/Creative Writing and is a member of several professional organizations, including Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), Romance Writers of America (RWA), American Christian Fiction Writers (ACFW), and Christian Authors Network (CAN), of which she is a founding board member. After working for several years in the computer software industry, she now provides writing and editing services for corporate business, publishers, and authors while working on her various writing and speaking projects. Marilyn, her husband, and their three children (and one feisty mini-dachshund) live in Northern California.

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