

STEPS IN NON-FICTION WRITING

Writing non-fiction isn't easy, is it? When you must for some reason write non-fiction, like it or not, it pays to do it right. Unlearned in this activity, I did some reading and came up with what follows. These steps have helped me, maybe they will help you.

1. **Choose the subject.** If the choice is yours, pick one that you know well, or can get to know well. You can't fake it; you must either be an expert or become one. The scope of the subject should fit the length of the piece, and vice-versa. Write a thousand-word description of Jones Beach, perhaps, but at least a volume for New York City. Don't stray from the subject, but keep it in focus always. Choose the title carefully. It reveals contents and sets limits.

2. **Gather the material.** Go after *all* the facts, many more than you will need. Don't miss anything, you can prune later. It is better to go too deep than too far afield. If you find more material than you can cover in depth, cut down the scope of the subject.

When you have all the facts, get to know them. Take your cards or pieces of paper and bury yourself in them, study them, play with them, arrange and rearrange them. Eliminate duplications, resolve inconsistencies, and set aside the impertinent for another time. Soak it all up. Add any comments that come to mind as you go through them. Make note of whatever seems to be missing, and go find it. Don't "tell all," omitting material that won't interest readers. Verify all facts. Watch out for "brand new" ones, which may be unreliable. Done before? Check that out.

Here is what Bertrand Russell wrote in *A History of Western Philosophy*:

I have found that, when I wish to write a book on some subject, I must first soak myself in detail until all the separate parts of the subject-matter are familiar; then, some day, if I am fortunate, I perceive the whole with all its parts duly interrelated. After that, I have only to write down what I have seen. The nearest analogy is first walking all over a mountain in a mist, until every path and ridge and valley is separately familiar, and then, from a distance, seeing the mountain whole and clear in bright sunshine.

3. **Put it Away.** Take the material and put it out of sight for a time, maybe a long time. Go on to something else. Even when you are not consciously thinking of it, the data will be there in your head, percolating.

You will know when the time has come to start writing. What you are waiting for is the "shape," the framework on which you will hang everything, to come to you. Perhaps it will be a typical item of a series, or a composite of a series. Maybe it will be a focus of the main theme, or a point about which all else will turn. If there appears to be more than one framework, consider dividing the work into separate pieces.

4. **Make an Outline.** Using the framework, write an outline. This may be just a few key words to define the main sections, or a detailed blueprint in which each paragraph is identified. Choose

the type that suits you and your subject. You can outline after writing, if you prefer, as a check on your work.

5. **Write it Straight Through.** Do this non-stop in one sitting if possible. Don't worry about quality at this point, just go like mad. If you stop to think, the words will not flow well.

6. **Make it Readable.** Parenthesize and punctuate to help the reader get your meaning quickly. Limit each paragraph to one topic. Size each to fit the depth and development of the topic and the seriousness of the subject.

Limit each sentence to one idea. Short sentences and short words make for easy reading and understanding. Vary sentence length for variety's sake, but the average should be short. Sentence fragments can help. Sharpen your sentences by cutting out deadwood.

If you write like you talk instead of straining for a literary effect, readability improves. Don't be afraid to repeat words; synonyms can be confusing. Don't use a long word when a short one will do, and don't be afraid of contractions. Prefer simple Anglo-Saxon words over long imported words.

Prefer irregular verbs (e.g., be, have, do, say, make, go, take, come, see, get) to regular ones (e.g., exist, possess, utter, fabricate, proceed, seize, arrive, visualize, obtain). Why? Because we learn the irregular verb forms piecemeal in childhood, thereby imprinting them with emotional overtones coming from the learning environment. These are stored in the temporal lobe, where memories go. The rules for regular verb forms are stored in more anterior parts of the brain, unaccompanied by emotional ties. That gives them less punch than the familiar irregulars.

7. **Make it Logical and Persuasive.** No one believes in experts, so start out by confessing your ignorance. Be humble. Then give facts, not opinions, which must come later. Add quotes from recognized experts, statistics, or any other objective tools to shore up the facts. Identify your sources. Resolve conflicts, be true and reliable. Avoid rehashing old stuff and seek out some fresh thoughts of your own. Be self-aware and control your emotions. Watch out for bias.

When reaching conclusions, start with your strongest argument, or at least state the main point first. Let each sentence lead logically to the next, while linking them to the main theme. It is the connection of ideas that will make your story convincing and easy to follow. Don't bury a climax in the middle of a sentence or paragraph.

Especially important is the last paragraph. Giving a picture of the whole, it should *sound* like the end, with a summation of the main theme and your conclusions. It should leave the reader with the intended effect.

8. **Make it Interesting.** Write interestingly, clearly, and simply. Remember who the readers are. What are their interests? Are they intelligent? Use a first-person or second-person style to establish intimacy with the reader. Use personal sentences, direct quotes instead of indirect (e.g., He said, in effect, "....."), personal words (uncle, aunt, girl, man), pronouns (she, he, they, but

avoid “it”), names of people, and words like baby, family, folks. Use dates, place names, ages, prices, symbols.

Start with a vivid quote, a question for the readers, a startling sentence—anything to grab attention. Make it a story with a happy ending. Use dialogue. Vary sentence construction instead of endlessly repeating noun-verb-object. Use action verbs and active, not passive, voice.

9. **Make it Vivid and Clear.** Illustrate your meaning. Give concrete examples for every abstract idea, and use concrete rather than abstract words. Include pictures and graphs, but be sure to explain them. Use your imagination. Bring in interesting quotations, anecdotes, and excerpts. Avoid unnecessary technical terms.

10. **Revise.** Wait as long as you can after the first draft, then pick it up with a fresh mind, as if you were reading someone else’s work. Go over it carefully. Has the subject been covered? Anything missing? Are more facts and details needed? Is there anything extraneous, contradictory, or misleading? How does the general plan look? Is the order right? Is the style right? Is the tone factual, professional, and restrained? Examine the mechanics: punctuation, spelling, vocabulary, syntax, grammar.

11. **Get Advice.** This is the time to get opinions from those who know your subject and from wordsmiths who can check your language. Accept their help, but if you don’t like what they say, ignore it. You are the best judge of what you want to say and how you say it.

12. **Revise Again.** When you are done with Rules 10 and 11, put the work away for a “second rising.” Wait for a time before taking it out and revising again. Repeat this step until the time comes when you can’t find anything to change. Then it’s ready for mailing.

While following these rules won’t guarantee success, you will know that your product is the best you can do, and that’s what counts.