

## Corporate Writing Pro

### 8 Weeks to Writing with Clarity

The following course is offered online to a maximum of 18 students by L. Michelle Baker, Ph.D., [The Corporate Writing Pro](#). It is intended for government writers responsible for technical and regulatory, rather than administrative, documents. Each module consists of a 90-minute interactive webinar and includes a handout with exercises that will be completed by course participants on a private online forum during the intervening week. Course participants receive two, 20-minute phone calls with me – one at the start of the course to assess their writing skills and their goals and one at the end of the course to assess their progress and produce a long-term working plan for continued improvement.

The only time we are taught to write is in school, in academic exercises that feel unrelated to the work many of us now do. Eight Weeks to Writing with Clarity offers writers a structure rooted in the six stages of writing, known as the Writing Cycle, along with a host of other tools by which they can manage the onslaught of documents, become more focused, gain clarity, and have a process in place to tackle any writing project.

#### Course Objectives:

1. Start writing with a sense of purpose in harmony with your agency's mission statement and the specific needs of the document and its audiences.
2. Have the confidence to approach any stage of the writing process with a set of tools that will allow effective, efficient completion of the task.
3. Write documents that are logically organized and well developed, with precise diction, strong topic sentences, and clear transitions.
4. Work successfully with reviewers to move a document through the chain of approval to successful publication.

**Week One – Gaining Perspective, The Writing Triangle:** Before beginning to write, we need to know why we're writing. This introductory session gives writers a sense of purpose, grounded in the mission statement of their organization, their own reasons for working with that organization, and the needs of the readers to whom they write. We'll also introduce the concept of the Writing Cycle and briefly overview each of the six stages. **Objectives:** (1) Ground your document in purpose and context; (2) write to your audiences in an appropriate tone; (3) work systematically through the Writing Cycle one stage at a time.

**Week Two – Brainstorming I: Playing in the Sandbox:** Some of a writer's shorter writing assignments – i.e., those that do not require research – demand one's own ingenuity. Yet a writer's instinct is to discover what other people have said about the

topic, and the result is a document that amalgamates information and lacks voice or insight. As paid professionals with extensive training in a subject area, writers can do better if they trust themselves to turn off the computers and play inside the sandbox of their own minds. This module will give you the confidence to do so by helping you to establish a network of writing partners. You'll be given some specific games you can play while you're inside the sandbox that will help you explore the topic you've been given in a systematic yet free-flowing fashion. **Objectives:** (1) Establish a support network; (2) learn a series of tools to help you explore a new topic including Aristotle's four causes, journalistic questions, freewriting, looping, and mindmapping.

**Week Three – Brainstorming II: Investigative Reporting:** Other documents writers are given require research. Three days in the field bagging and tagging ferrets is the kind of adventure that conservation biologists sought when deciding upon the profession. Even losing oneself in a series of journal articles can be a welcome respite from the seemingly endless stream of bureaucratic correspondence that crosses one's desk in a given week. Yet at some point, those experiences must be quantified, the literature review needs to be summarized, and if a palatable document is to result, writers require something better than a mass of data in their skulls or a pile of documents on their desks. This module will give you some techniques to use in the field and with your literature review so you can emerge from the research phase with a set of working notes that can be easily organized into an outline and a draft. **Objectives:** (1) Capture your field research by journaling and conversing; (2) do some STAR research in the lab; (3) search the right databases effectively; (4) read actively; (5) interview experts expertly; (6) keep your notes organized.

**Week Four – Selecting and Arranging: Putting the Puzzle Together:** If you're writing a document of any length, you're probably already using an outline of some sort. Whether you're following that outline during the writing process is another question altogether. Writers have difficulty creating meaningful outlines for a number of different reasons. First, the mass of topics that needs to be handled in any given document seems overwhelming. You'll learn how to classify ideas to limit the number of topics that we're dealing with in any given outline. Second, the complexity of the relationships seems too great to be expressed in simple terms. However, only a limited number of logical relationships connect the ideas. We'll review those. Finally, when ideas can be presented in varying orders, writers have real difficulty deciding which is best. You'll be provided with a few standard arrangement schemes and discuss the pros and cons of each. **Objectives:** (1) Differentiate between and practice the skills of classification and division; (2) learn to use the six most common logical connections to your advantage when preparing an outline; (3) arrange claims in support of a position in order of greatest effectiveness based upon audience expectations; (4) for correspondence and other small documents, craft effective introductions and conclusions.

**Week Five – Writing I: Writing with Style:** By the time we arrive at the fourth stage of the Writing Cycle, we should know what we are going to say and the order in which we are going to say it. Now is the time for us to decide how. In any given document, but particularly one of great length, we will employ several different writing styles. In one

part of the document, we might tell the story of how the small bird, the Akikiki, came to reside in Hawaii. In another part we might define the term “Section 7.” And in yet another part, we might compare and contrast the two species, the Akikiki and the Kaua'i Nukupu'u. These different writing styles, or modes of discourse, provide us with a strategy for writing a series of paragraphs, a way of speaking to our audience, and a means of closing the loop for each piece of the document. In this module, we'll review several different modes that you'll likely be using in each of the documents you write as well as strategies for a few of the more common modes, including narration, definition, and comparison/contrast. **Objectives:** (1) Review common modes of discourse; (2) determine which mode is appropriate for which section of the document; (3) write effectively in each of the following modes: narration, definition, comparison/contrast.

**Week Six – Writing II: Molding the Clay:** In Writing I, we focused on content. But writing is also about words, sentences, and paragraphs. So in Writing II, we focus on the raw material. We'll rediscover the basics of paragraph structure, including the importance of topic sentences. We'll talk about how to construct position paragraphs that are truly convincing. Then we'll discuss sentences. You'll learn to reduce words by preferring clauses to phrases. Using clauses will also allow you to transform hidden verbs so your prose becomes vibrant. Finally we'll move to the individual word. You'll get some tips for how to select the best word and for how to improve your vocabulary. **Objectives:** (1) Write paragraphs that are focused, unified, and developed; (2) construct sentences with independent and dependent clauses and few phrases; (3) keep subjects and verbs close to the beginning of clauses and near to one another; (4) use clear and vivid diction.

**Week Seven – Revision: Negotiating Relationships with Your Document and Your Editor:** The first challenge in editing your own work is finding a way to make a document you've seen time and time again unfamiliar to you. So we'll discuss a number of strategies you can use to make a manuscript strange and approach the editing process with a fresh eye. We'll show you how to separate substantive editing from copyediting and proofreading and give you checklists for each. And we'll also establish a review plan, because we know that this is not a perfect world and that a document often needs to be scheduled for review before it's complete. Finally, we'll talk about how to negotiate good relationships with your reviewers so you can stop hitting the “accept all changes” button and actually begin to learn from the review process. **Objectives:** (1) Review strategies to make a document strange; (2) differentiate between substantive editing, copyediting, and proofreading; (3) establish a review plan; (4) establish a working relationship with your reviewer.

**Week Eight – Grammar & Mechanics:** Learning the finer points of the English language is an ongoing process that should be pursued throughout one's lifetime. This session is not intended to be comprehensive, but to be an introduction to further learning. We'll review some of the basic terms common to English grammar, including parts of speech. We'll talk about a few of the errors that plague most writers: comma rules, the difference between *that* and *which*, and problems with dangling modifiers and split infinitives. Scientific and regulatory writers have their own challenges, so we'll also talk about stacked nouns and modifiers and hidden verbs, also called nominalizations. Finally,

you'll be introduced to a few of the reference works common to your field, including the Council of Science Editor's *Scientific Style and Format* and the *Government Printing Office's Style Manual*. **Objectives:** (1) Review grammar terminology; (2) review comma rules; (3) differentiate between essential and non-essential clauses; (4) place modifiers correctly; (5) replace phrases with clauses; (6) eliminate nominalizations; (7) select and use reference works appropriate to the writing that you do.