



## Get the Write Start (I)

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Writing skills are perhaps the most sought-after and scarce professional skills in the workplace today. In our knowledge economy, professionals need to be able to express their thoughts, ideas, plans and solutions in writing - they have to do it well, and they have to do it quickly.

Sadly, poor business writing is considered one of the biggest impediments to personal and organizational productivity. It is responsible for a significant loss of man-hours each day considering the seemingly endless corrections that go on each time a letter or a proposal needs to be written.



Unfortunately, the quality of writing skills seems to be diminishing, not only here in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, but across the world. While the advent of social media and micro-chatting can be adduced for some of the global writing challenges, the challenges in Nigeria can be squarely placed on falling standards of education across all levels, evidenced by a high population of new school leavers and graduates who struggle with stringing grammatically correct

sentences in our official English Language.

For those who want to challenge whether or not we should be emphasizing the English Language, the simple answer is: 1) There aren't sufficient literary works in our indigenous languages to provide the breadth of learning that we require across a variety of knowledge areas - *Do we have books in Itsekiri, Billiri and Ebira on Leadership, Creativity and Strategy, for example?* 2) English is the language of global business and commerce, and if our

organizations and professionals are to remain relevant and competitive, we must be communicating in English.

So, the real challenge before us is how can we address some of the very important gaps that exist in our Business Writing Skills. While a lot of work needs to be done in addressing the root-cause in our educational curricular and delivery - which is mostly due to the poor quality of teachers in our educational sector, we can still carry out some remedial education for professionals as they transition to the workplace and during their careers.

A wholistic program should address at least four critical areas:

- Foundational Principles of Effective Communication and Business Writing
- Improving your Grammar - Mind Your Language
- Skills for Enhancing Your Writing
- Writing Protocols for various Business Documents

We will examine each of these one after the other.

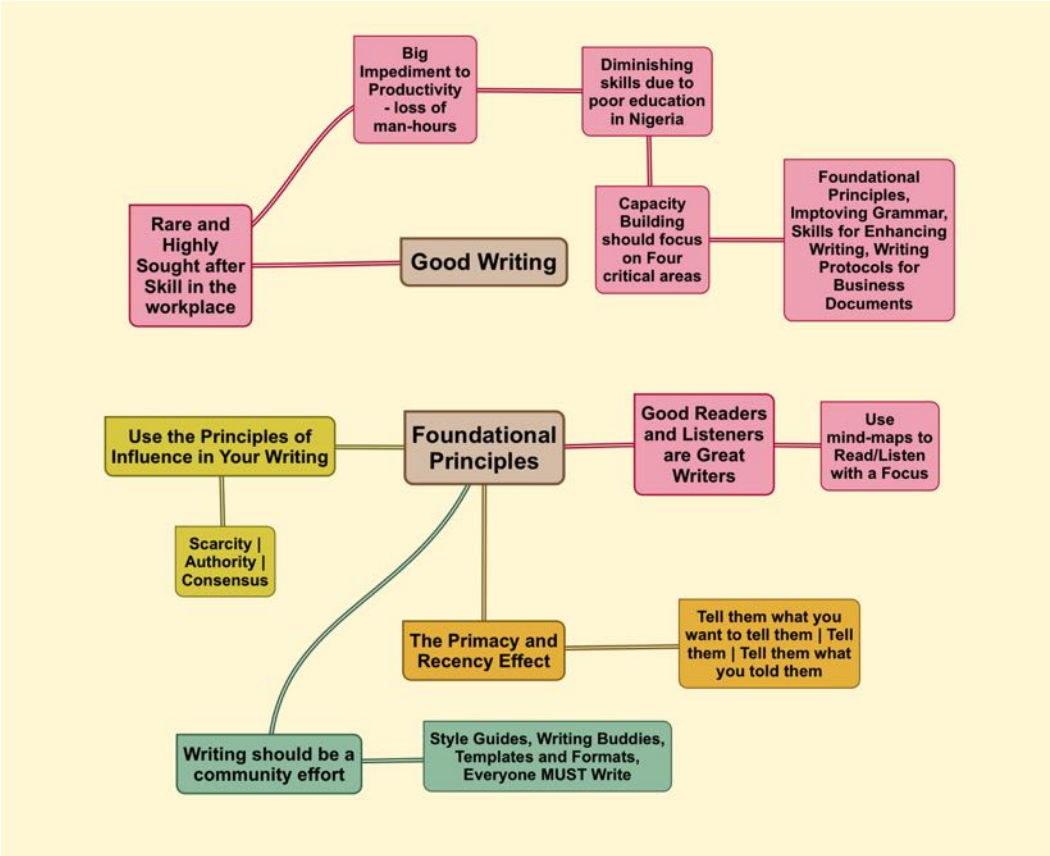
## ***Principles of Effective Communication and Business Writing***

Like everything else, good communication and writing are based on some foundational principles. Writing is a sub-set of Communication, and all good communication is about the transmission of messages to an audience in a manner that it is properly understood to create the required action and outcomes. Some of the important principles that will guide better business writing include:

- Business Writing is different from creative writing
- Good writing requires practice
- Your Organizational brand is revealed in your writing
- **Good Readers and Listeners are Great Writers**
- **The Primacy and Recency Effect**
- **Use Influence in Your Writing**
- **Writing should be a Community Effort**
- Mind Your Grammar
- Writing isn't always the best means of communicating
- Great Writing Can Transform Your Career and Business

### Good Readers and Listeners are Great Writers

All our writing is inspired by what we read, hear or watch, so the best writers must be good at analyzing and interpreting the information that they receive, so that they can generate new ideas and solutions that they can write about, themselves. A powerful tool for analytical thinking and writing that I have used and encourage others to use is the Mind Map. A Mind-Map is a tool that creates a visual or pictorial representation of information to allow you summarize and articulate the information as well as develop ideas for your written communication. A mind-map therefore serves a dual purpose - firstly to help you organize you reading (including listening and watching) and secondly to help you develop ideas for your writing. My rules: each time you are receiving valuable information, track the important thoughts and ideas using a mind map; and each time you are preparing to write anything, create a mind-map to guide your ideas. Here is a diagram of what a typical mind-map looks like, and participants in our Workshops get a chance to develop and practice with mind-maps (*do you notice anything interesting about my sample mind-map?*)



## ***The Primacy and Recency Effect***

This principle simply says that when audiences receive communication, they are usually more focused on the things that were transmitted at the beginning (primacy) and at the end (recency). Good communicators understand this and structure their messages with a powerful attention-grabbing beginning that includes the core issues in the message and a compelling and action-focused end that summarizes and calls the audience to action. The primacy and recency effect requires us to structure all our communication in this way:

Beginning of the Message	Tell them what you want to tell them (Introduction, Summary & Purpose)
Middle of the Message	Tell Them (Detailed Information)
End of the Message	Tell Them what you told them

## ***Use Influence in Your Writing***

Most of our business communication aims at persuading our audience to act in a particular manner. To influence your readers, I will suggest that you apply some of the time-tested principles of influence that great communicators have used with significant success. There are a number of principles of influence, but I will like to focus on just three of them and illustrate how they can be used as follows:

<b>Principle of Influence</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
The Principle of Scarcity	This principle is focused on getting your audience to act by communicating the consequences of not agreeing to your recommendation.	“If you do not invest in Nigeria, you stand to lose returns of up to 16% p.a. which is much higher than in any country in Africa”
The Principle of Authority	By demonstrating that you are an authority in a particular area or referencing an authority	“According to Harvard Business Review’s Survey of Top CEO’s,

	figure you can influence others towards your proposition	the best CEOs have an Executive Coach, so you too should invest in Executive Coaching.”
The Principle of Consensus	This principle is focused on showing your audience that other people or institutions that they love, admire or respect have bought into your proposition or something similar. Human beings are gregarious in nature, so they tend to “follow the herd” and are influenced by what other people do. Your job is to show how other institutions, groups or individuals with similar characteristics like them (industry, size, affiliation) have used your proposition and found it valuable.	“For you at the National Pension Commission, implementing this solution will help you enjoy the benefits of automation that organizations like the Nigerian Deposit Insurance Corporation, Central Bank of Nigeria and Securities & Exchange Commission have taken advantage of. Here are testimonials from their Directors.”

***Writing should be a Community Effort***

Good writing says a lot about an organization’s culture - the quality of its leaders and people, it’s attention to detail and the value that it places on effective communication and managing its brand and image. Successful organizations are concerned about this and they pay significant attention to fostering a culture of effective writing across their organizations.

It is disheartening to hear Line Managers and Executives complain that the writing skills of one team member or the other is deficient when that leader has not done enough to improve the writing culture within the team. Often such leaders may not be very proficient at writing either, or even if they are, they have not mastered the techniques for effective writing properly to guide and mentor others around them to do the same. There are a number of things that we consider best practice in creating and sustaining a culture of effective writing in organizations and teams, and we will share a few of them here:



There are a number of things that we consider best practice in creating and sustaining a culture of effective writing in organizations and teams, and we will share a few of them here:

- Every organization should have a Writing Style Guide that spells out in clear terms the appropriate fonts, sizes, format and structure of business writing with templates to guide staff members on what is appropriate and what is not. There should be training on how to use the style guide and proper explanations should be given regarding some of the nuances of the style guide.
- Organizations should develop templates and samples that provide guidance on the most common business documents, explaining how to use and adapt such templates and samples to various writing situations e.g. templates for memos, letters of complaint, responses to complaints, business proposals, leave requests, minutes of meetings and reports. These templates are not CAST in stone and should be refreshed from time to time as new skills are learned and the organization evolves.
- Everyone should be given writing tasks especially those who shy away from them. This is the only way they will practice, get some feedback and improve their writing skills - leaving writing to only the “gifted” ones is a dangerous strategy.
- When people write, a team member/peer should be responsible for vetting what they have written - peer review and a writing buddy program ensures that writing skills become cultural. If for example, Yewande asks Funso to write a letter, she will assign Gbitse as a writing buddy, with a responsibility to thoroughly review and correct Funso’s draft. When Funso submits to Yewande, she doesn’t give him feedback directly, rather she holds his writing buddy, Gbitse responsible. This way, Gbitse takes the review and correcting of

Funso's work seriously and vice-versa, and in a short time everyone begins to improve their writing.

So, we have an overview of why good writing is important, some of the areas of writing skills that everyone needs to know and a number of principles and tools that can help get you off to the *write start* with your writing and improve writing skills in your organization. We will continue the series on Getting the Write Start with "Improving Your Grammar - a.k.a.: Mind Your Language".

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