

Put it into Writing

The Complete Communicator

Self-Study Workbook

Every effort has been made to check the factual accuracy of the information given in this book at the time of publication, but it should not be regarded as a substitute for seeking appropriate professional advice as and when necessary. Video Arts Ltd hereby disclaims any responsibility, and will not accept any liability, for any claim from any action based upon any information contained in this book. The opinions expressed are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of Video Arts Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, now known or hereafter invented, without the prior permission of Video Arts Ltd.

© Video Arts Ltd, 2003

1.	Introduction	
	About this package.....	3
2.	Overview	
	Outcomes from this workbook.....	5
	Purpose.....	5
	Synopsis of the video Put it into Writing	5
	Before you start.....	6
3.	Your Own Experiences	
	How do you want to improve?.....	9
	Defining outcomes.....	11
	Using a spider diagram.....	17
	Making the right impression.....	20
	Changing minds.....	29
	The final checks.....	30
	Signing off.....	30
4.	Further Reading.....	31
5.	Notes.....	32

About this package

How we communicate with one another is fundamental to all workplace activity. But we need to ask ourselves why we communicate. Very often it is because we want to influence people in order to achieve our own goals. Sometimes, personal power is the source of influence, but in most cases influence is more likely to be a matter of persuasion. We achieve our goals through the words we speak, the way we write and the non-verbal signals we send out. These three behaviours are the subject of three videos which form the series *The Complete Communicator*.

Component parts

The Self-Study version of **Put it into Writing** comprises this workbook and the video **Put it into Writing**.

The self-study course covers some, but not all, of the material that is included in the face-to-face training course, details of which appear in the Trainer's Guide.

Put it into Writing is one of three training packages featuring the same fictional company, and all related to the theme of using effective communication to influence. The other titles are:

- **Feedback Day** (which considers how feedback can influence behaviour).
- **Communication Beyond Words** (which looks at body language and non-verbal communication).

How the course is structured

The contents of this workbook are designed to complement and extend the contents of the video, and to help you relate the video drama to your own experience. To this end, the written materials make frequent reference to the drama. You may like to watch the video from start to finish before you start work on this workbook. If you would like to refer to the video again, follow the instructions in the text telling you when to start and stop the tape.

Introduction

Who will benefit from this course?

The self-study course **Put it into Writing** is aimed at all members of staff up to and including first level managers. It will be especially useful to you if you are relatively new to your role and find that some of the following statements apply to you.

- You find it difficult to get started on your written tasks.
- You would like to be able to write persuasively.
- You would like to consider the effect and impact of your written communications.
- You are uncertain about some of the conventions of writing, grammar and spelling.

The workbook

The workbook consists of a core text with a variety of built-in activities for you to complete. These are signposted by the following symbol.



Some of the activities are very short; others require more time and effort. Be sure to complete the activity before going on to the comment which follows it.

One of the advantages of the activities is that they make your learning active; they are intended to arouse your interest in what you are about to learn, check your understanding of basic concepts and assist you in applying what you have learnt to your own situation. So it is important that you take the trouble to do them thoroughly!

The video



In the workbook a video symbol indicates a specific link between the text and video, and ideally at this point you should go and watch the relevant video scene before reading on.

Working conditions

The course will take around two hours to complete. Try to find a quiet place, without interruptions, in which to work.

Your learning will be most effective if you take at least one break.

Outcomes from this workbook

Effective communication is a crucial element in successful organisations. But what does 'effective' mean? The 'who' and the 'what' – ensuring that the right information is exchanged between the right people – are obviously important aspects of the definition. But there's another aspect to consider: how a particular communication comes across to the recipient.

When we speak to someone face-to-face, we can judge the effect we are having. If they look puzzled, we can explain further. If they are angry, we can calm them. If they are unconvinced by our arguments, we can explore a subject further. When we communicate in writing, this feedback is denied us. We therefore need to consider very carefully the words we use and the influence they might have. We need to think about the effect we want to have, and the unintended impact we might have if our communications are poorly written.

By the time you have completed this workbook, you will have analysed your typical written communications, and will be aware of what you could do to make them more influential in the way you intend.

Purpose

The purpose of this workbook is to help you:

- analyse the 'purpose' of your written communications
- express yourself in a way that supports your 'purpose'
- tackle your writing tasks more quickly and confidently.

Synopsis of the video Put it into Writing

Nisha and her colleagues, Marcus and Alan, are Business Development Managers at Talkwave Communications. Part of the company's activities are concerned with hiring out mobile phones.

Whilst Nisha finds it easy to communicate in writing, both Marcus and Alan face considerable obstacles, not least in getting started.

Overview

Nisha helps them both to decide what it is they want to say, and to produce clear, fluent output that conveys the right message to the recipient. She advises them to start by considering the purpose of their communication and follows this with a technique for mapping out the content. She then draws their attention to the tone of their writing, and the effect this could have on the reader. Finally, after considering style and layout, she recommends that they check their work carefully for spelling and grammatical errors.

As a result of her tuition, Marcus and Alan feel more confident about their ability to achieve the effects they want in their written communications.

Before you start

As you work through this workbook, you will be invited to compare your own work with the advice given. You will therefore need to do two things before you start.

- Collect some typical examples of your written communications.
A representative sample may include short memos and letters to colleagues and/or letters to customers and suppliers. The most useful examples will be those where you want to change something, point out or resolve a problem, or canvass ideas and opinions. Longer reports are outside the scope of this workbook. Don't try to choose only your best pieces of work. You will learn more by improving work that you are less satisfied with.
- Keep a record for a week or so of each piece of writing that you do. Use the outline provided on the following page. The 'purpose' column refers to the reason why you wrote the particular example and the outcome(s) you were wanting.



My written communications between(date) and
.....(date)

Type of communication
(e.g. memo, e-mail, letter)

Recipient

Purpose/Outcomes

How do you want to improve?

The need to communicate in writing produces different reactions in different people. There are those who put it off until the last possible moment. Others dash off their words with impressive speed and ease, but ignore the finer points of expression and effect. For some, writing is full of pitfalls, with grammatical errors and spelling mistakes lurking in every sentence.

How do you feel about your writing tasks? What do you do easily? What aspects are you less confident about? Many people who want to improve their skills will experience difficulties in one or more of the following areas.

Barriers

These are the blockages and difficulties you may face before you can get started.

Preparation

This includes collecting the information you need and being clear about what you want to say.

Purpose and Outcomes

It helps to know what you would like to happen as a result of your communication and to bear this in mind as you write.

Style

Aspects of style include the words you use, the tone of your writing, the layout, and much more besides.

Correctness

Spelling? Grammar? 'Dear Sir'? 'Dear Sue'? There's room for so many mistakes that the fear of getting things wrong provokes anxiety and a reluctance to put anything down on paper.

Take a few minutes to reflect on how you would like to improve. The list of questions in the 'Reflection' box that follows will help you sort out your priorities. Do this before you watch the video. This way, its contents will mean more to you because you will already have focused on what you would like to be better at.

Your Own Experiences

Reflection on how you feel about writing



Consider each item in the list below and rate it on the following three-point scale:

1. Very true
2. Somewhat true
3. Not true.

- | | | | | |
|-----|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I put off writing until the last minute. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. | It's difficult to work out what I need to say. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. | I sometimes lack the information I need for a particular piece of writing. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. | I find it difficult to put words down on paper. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 5. | I don't always achieve the effect I intend from my writing. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 6. | My writing doesn't flow: it doesn't sound natural. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 7. | I don't know how formal or informal I could or should be when I write. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 8. | My boss tells me that it's sometimes difficult to work out from my writing exactly what I mean. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 9. | I'm nervous about making grammatical errors and mistakes in spelling. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 10. | I'm not sure how to address people when I write to them. | 1 | 2 | 3 |



Start the video

Now watch the video up to the point where Nisha quotes the old saying:

Nisha: Marcus, there's an old saying: 'Give a man a fish and you've fed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you've fed him for a lifetime'.

Alan: We're not hungry.



Stop the video

Defining outcomes

Alan struggled with his writing and tended to put things off until the last moment.

Alan: Let's face it, writing's not easy. Truth be told, I've been putting it off. I only got round to it half an hour ago.

Nisha: Let's see what you've got so far.

Alan: Read it at your own risk. It doesn't exactly... flow.

Marcus found it equally difficult, but for different reasons. He just couldn't get started.

Nisha: Marcus. Your screen is blank.

Marcus: I write slowly.

Nisha: Ice ages happen faster than this.

To help both of them to get started, Nisha's first piece of advice is about preparation, and is fundamental to writing persuasively. She asks them to consider the very basic question of why they are writing something in the first place.

Your Own Experiences

Note how Marcus answers. He says he needs some information from another department in order that Alan can write a letter to Sue Burns. She is an important customer that Talkwave Communications fear they might lose. But this isn't answering Nisha's question, so she rephrases it. She asks:

Nisha: Think bigger than that. What's your ultimate goal?

She prompts him to think beyond the immediate requirement for the information and helps him to see that what he really wants is a quick response so that Alan can send his letter as soon as possible. So Marcus needed to explain two things to his colleague. It was important that he first mentioned the time pressures, and secondly, explained their significance.

Alan gets the gist of Nisha's question and answers more insightfully. He says:

Alan: We're responding to a complaint Sue made, so I guess ultimately what we're trying to do is keep her on board. Get her to stay with us as a client.

Nisha: So you're trying to placate her? Calm her down?

Reflection on the contents of a memo



The memo below is the inadequate e-mail that Marcus might have written to his colleague, Dave, before Nisha's instruction.

Memo 1

Dave:

I'm writing to Sue Burns about her contract to hire phones from us. I need to tell her about our new charging policy for the US. Can you let me know when it will take effect, please, and what the charges will be?

*Thanks
Marcus*

Assuming that Dave is a busy person, how quickly do you think he would respond to Memo 1? He would most probably have added it to his list of things to do, and replied when he had completed the tasks that he considered to be more urgent.

Write here an alternative memo that would be more likely to get the immediate reply that Marcus needed.

Memo 2

Your Own Experiences

Comment

Your version of Marcus's e-mail should explain:

- why Sue Burns is an important customer
- the urgency of writing to her at this particular time
- the implications of not placating her
- the specific information requested
- the time frame Marcus is working to.

The version below shows one way of incorporating these points. Compare it with your own rewrite.

Hi Dave.

Please respond to this e-mail as soon as you can. The fate of the company depends on it! And that's not a joke. I'll explain.

Recently, we had a bit of a problem with our most important client, GDK. They took some of our phones to New York without understanding the Roaming Agreements, and when they received their bills, they were appalled at the charges. They thought they would be billed at local, New York rates, and were surprised when the calls came out of San Francisco.

Now they are angry. Gerry and Cassandra are very upset about this, because they are pitching for GDK national business! You can see why we need to act fast.

Alan is busily writing a letter to Sue Burns at GDK, promising her that she won't be charged for the phone hire, but we need some other information to stick in his letter right away. We want to tell her about the change in the American billing system, so that we can reassure her it won't happen again. Do you know when that will be coming into effect?

Also, have you got any idea how much the charge per minute will be? I should also warn you, we are promising Sue that her next phone hire will be free as well. I know that is not our usual policy, but it is important in this case, and Gerry has already approved it.

Once again, I would appreciate it if you would respond right away. (Otherwise, you'll have Gerry phoning you – and you know what that's like!)

Thanks for your speedy help!

Marcus.

Your Own Experiences

If Dave had received an e-mail like this, he would most probably have given it almost immediate attention, which is what Alan and Marcus needed.

The e-mail followed a general structure that can be used in different situations. It described:

- the purpose (getting a quick response in order to save the company!)
- the problem/the situation (Sue Burns is angry with us)
- the implications (we may lose GDK business as a result)
- the strategy (writing to her immediately with new information that might influence her decision to stay or take her business elsewhere).

In some cases, a final 'follow-up' stage would be useful, to say what will happen next.

You might think that the e-mail was too long. However, it had the merit of explaining the situation fully, and if it achieved the desired result – namely a speedy response – then the time would have been well spent. Compare the time it would have taken to write the memo with the additional time that might have been needed to chase up the information if Dave hadn't replied quickly enough.

You may also have noticed the chatty tone and wondered how appropriate it was. It does assume that Marcus and Dave know each other well. If they didn't, then a more restrained tone might have been better.

So defining the outcome you want from a piece of writing is important because it will shape the content of what you write. This is an important element in influencing your reader in the way you intend.

The next reflection invites you to consider your own work in this light. You will need to refer to your list of written communications over a period of time and the samples of your written work (see page 6 of this workbook).

Your Own Experiences

Reflection on your own written examples



Part 1

Firstly, look at each of the items on your list and ask yourself if you were:

- wanting the recipient of the letter, e-mail, etc. to do something for you
- expecting the recipient to make some change as a result of your letter, e-mail, etc.

If you answer 'Yes', then you were trying to influence the recipient.

From assessing the items on your list, you will be able to judge how much you need to influence people at work.

Part 2

Now look at your samples of your actual writing. Focus on the ones where you wanted something from the recipient, or where you wanted them to change in some way.

Ask yourself whether:

- the outcomes you wanted were absolutely clear in your own mind
- you were clear in your writing about what you wanted
- you explained why you wanted something, or were asking for something to change.

If not, write a note here, to yourself, to highlight how your written communication could be clearer.



Return to the video

Restart the tape at the point you left off. Play it up to the point where Nisha asks Alan whether drawing a diagram would help him write his letter.

Nisha: Do you think doing this would help you to write your letter?

Alan: Well, I suppose so.

Nisha: Go on then. You do it.



Stop the video

Using a spider diagram

One of the barriers to getting started on a piece of writing is a feeling of confusion about what to include. Nisha's advice to Marcus and Alan was that they should use a 'spider diagram' to map out the contents.

A spider diagram is simply a visual way of mapping out your thoughts on paper as they occur to you. The idea is that you place the main idea at the centre of the diagram, and then draw branches radiating from it representing the major related topics. You can then divide each branch into smaller branches and then into yet smaller branches as you add more and more detail to each topic.

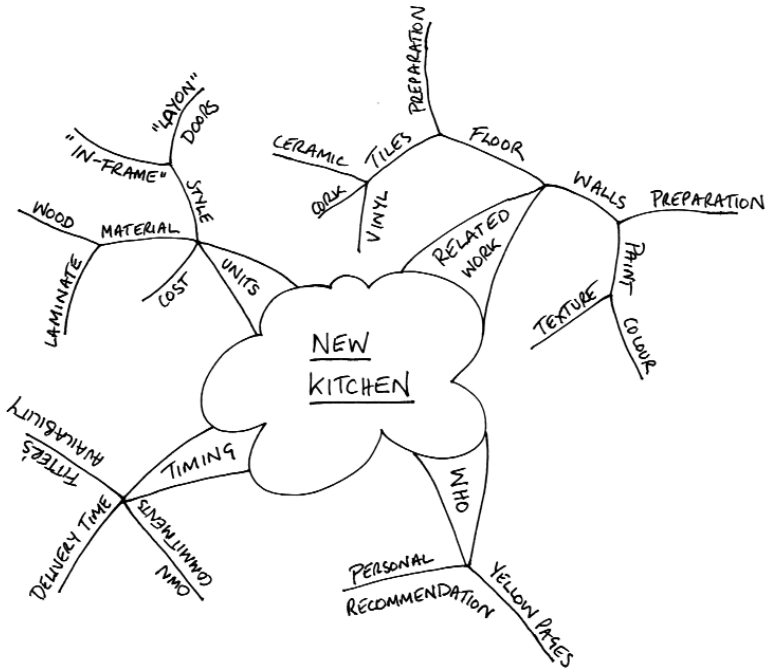
When you are trying to influence people, your main topic will be the outcome you want to achieve.

The method has lots of advantages. You can:

- put things down in any order
- see the connections between them
- add as much detail as you choose
- add little symbols or pictures – anything to make it more visual
- very quickly map out a complete picture.

Your Own Experiences

Example of a spider diagram:



Reflection on spider diagram



Practise the technique on a persuasive communication that you will have to write soon.

Map it out here.

Your Own Experiences

By drawing a diagram like this, it will become very clear to you where you need extra information. Collect this information before you start drafting your letter or memo.



Return to the video

Restart the video from where you left off and play it up to the point where Nisha says:

Nisha: I don't know, Marcus – you haven't written anything yet. Let's take half an hour right now. Alan, you can work on your letter, and Marcus, you can write your e-mail.

Making the right impression

Nisha found that Alan had managed to write a substantial letter to Sue Burns, but that he was unhappy with his style. She soon identified why. His choice of words and the layout of his text failed to convey the right impression.

Effective use of words

First, Nisha tackled the tone of his words, pointing out that he struck a discordant note right at the very start with 'Dear Ms Burns'. Since he would call her 'Sue' face-to-face, he should address her in the same way when writing to her.

She also pointed out that his subsequent language was full of stiff, pompous, official phrases that obscured his message.

He is not alone. Many business letters are written in this way and do a poor job at communicating with the recipient. They could be much more persuasive if they sounded more like the spoken word. For example, when we speak, we don't say:

- 'We are in receipt of your letter of ...'
- 'We have pleasure in enclosing a representative sample of our products for your favourable consideration.'
- 'Pursuant to...'
- '... at this moment in time' (Well... maybe some people do use this phrase in their everyday speech, but there's no need for five words when one would do.)

Instead, we might say:

- 'Thank you for your letter' or 'We received your letter...'
- 'We have enclosed a sample of our products. We hope you like them' or '... we hope they meet your specification.'
- 'You talked yesterday to Nisha...'
- '... now'

A word of caution is appropriate here, though. Spoken language is full of slang, and jokey buzz words that have a short shelf-life. It is peppered with colloquialisms that obscure rather than enrich and have no place in written communications. Effective, persuasive language is clear, simple and straightforward.

The other trap that Alan fell into is a very common one. He used the indirect, passive voice. This shows itself in sentences where 'something was done to someone'. In Alan's case, he wrote: 'a letter was sent to you...'. Statements like this are unclear because they don't identify who took the action. Indeed, the passive voice is often chosen precisely because the writer wants to leave things slightly vague.

In Alan's case, he had no reason to be obscure. He could have used the active voice instead, and said very simply: 'I sent you a letter...'. This would have been a clearer, more direct statement of what actually happened.

Reflection on language



Read through your own samples of written communication. Highlight any examples that you find of:

- 'official business language' instead of sentences that sound as straightforward as speech
- the passive voice instead of the active.

Try changing your examples to make them simpler and more direct. Ask a colleague to comment on your revisions.

Your Own Experiences

Layout



Return to the video

Play the video up to the point where Cassandra comes in to put pressure on Alan to finish his letter to Sue.

Cassandra: Alan, we're in a hurry.

Alan: I know that, but if the letter isn't right we will have failed to achieve our desired outcomes, now won't we?

Cassandra: Have you been talking to Nisha?

In the section you have just watched, Nisha points out that the impression made by a piece of writing doesn't depend only on the words the writer uses. It will also be affected by the layout. Long sentences are difficult to follow. Solid blocks of text are hard to read.

She encouraged Marcus to break up his text into separate paragraphs, with shorter sentences. This way, he would be more confident that his reader would actually read everything that he had written.

Reflection on layout



The following piece of text should be broken up into shorter sentences and several short paragraphs. Read it through and then rewrite it more clearly.

A newspaper article published some time ago made some interesting points about some basic rules of influencing people at work, first tackling the issue of whether a manager should use the telephone or attempt to persuade someone face-to-face. It came down in favour of the telephone when the manager has a strong case and thinks that she will be able to win the argument, the logic behind this being that face-to-face, the manager might have to cope with the non-verbal indications of the other person's discomfort, whereas over the phone, she can put her case without having to face this emotional difficulty.

Your Own Experiences



The article suggests certain rules to follow, the first of which is to bear in mind, when trying to change someone's mind, the importance of keeping an argument straightforward, and not undermining the main and strongest point with several subsidiary ones because these can so easily lead to distracting arguments, during which the main argument is forgotten. The second point relates to consistency, meaning that it will undermine an argument to change tack half-way through, particularly if the argument is brought in because the original one has been strongly challenged and the proponent of it feels on weak ground and therefore tries to shift into a different area.

Think what the text is trying to say. Then write your version here.

Your Own Experiences

Comment

The text below expresses the main points. There will be more elegant ways of saying the same thing, but the version below has the virtue of being clear and concise.

Does your version make the same points, with similar clarity?

There are some basic rules that will help you to win an argument.

If you have the choice between using the telephone or trying to persuade someone face-to-face, choose the phone if your argument is strong. This way you will be less distracted by the emotions of the person on the other end of the line.

If your argument is weak, then meet your opponent face-to-face. This lessens his or her opportunity to gain an advantage over you.

You will put your argument most strongly if you:

- keep it straightforward
- stick to your main points and avoid subsidiary ones
- express yourself consistently, avoiding sudden changes of tack.

If you don't observe these rules, you will give your opponents opportunities to challenge what you are saying.

Note the use of:

- short paragraphs
- uncomplicated sentences
- bullet points to highlight items in a list.

These points make the text so much easier to read. Suddenly the message becomes clear.

Clarity of meaning

In the midst of Marcus's densely written paragraph, Nisha's eagle eye spotted an ambiguity in one of his sentences.

Nisha: Look at this. 'The new American tariff system should be in place in time for GDK Ltd's next American trip. Could you please tell me when it's going to happen?' How do they know when GDK's next American trip will be?

No doubt Marcus knew exactly what he meant, but his reader would most probably stop and re-read the sentence in order to sort it out. It's easy for such ambiguities to slip in, so watch out for them in your own writing. If in doubt, check with your colleagues. Ask them if anything is unclear or ambiguous to them.

Your Own Experiences

Reflection on ambiguity



Remove the ambiguity from each of the four sentences below.
Compare your version with the 'Comment' that follows.

No one here is allowed to sell anything except Marcus.

Your version:

Sue Burns rang Talkwave Communications and was transferred to
Gerry by the receptionist with great politeness.

Your version:



Talkwave Communications under the direction of Gerry and Cassandra, now three years old, is turning into a very successful company.

Your version:

Re-write the following sentences without ambiguity.

Your version:

Your Own Experiences

Comment

1. Poor Marcus. He is the only thing that can be sold! The sentence could be re-written as:

'Marcus is the only person allowed to sell things here.'

2. Gerry is so lucky to have a receptionist with great politeness! The sentence would have read better as:

Sue Burns rang Talkwave Communications. The receptionist politely put her through to Gerry.

3. Gerry and Cassandra sound like child prodigies! What the writer meant was:

Talkwave Communications is now three years old. Under the direction of Gerry and Cassandra, it is turning into a very successful company.

4. It was in fact very difficult to write an unambiguous instruction for this exercise. You have already read the way round this. It was:

'Remove the ambiguity from each of the four sentences below. Compare your version with the Comment that follows.'

Guidelines for clear writing

- Let your writing sound like the spoken word.
- Avoid long, pompous or official-sounding words.
- Imagine you are talking to the recipient of your communication. Let your writing style reflect how well you know them and the importance or urgency of your message.
- Keep your sentences short.
- Make your points clear by allocating them to separate paragraphs.

Changing minds

How can you change someone's mind? With difficulty in many cases, because people often hold entrenched views that are not readily changed by logic. However, there are some specific techniques to use when you move beyond asking for help, and into more fundamental shifts of opinion. You have already worked with some of these in the 'Reflection' exercise on page 22.

- Keep your argument straightforward. Put your case concisely and clearly. If you require something, say so. Avoid trying to strengthen your argument with supplementary facts and ideas. The more additional, supportive information you give, the greater the opportunity for someone to find something to challenge.
- Stick to your main argument. One strong argument on its own is more convincing than one strong argument plus several weaker arguments. The weaker arguments don't enhance the main point. They simply increase the likelihood of disputes.
- Be consistent. Stick to your argument. Don't change tack halfway through presenting it. If you do, you will undermine your credibility.
- Keep your language moderate and free of sarcasm. You won't increase support by overstating your case. Nor will you gain respect by running down opposing views.
- Use the pronoun 'you' more than you use 'I'. This is particularly important when you want to win someone over to your point of view, rather than beating them down through the sheer force of your logic.

Your Own Experiences

The final checks

The contents of this workbook will have helped you to:

- clarify the outcomes you want from any written communications
- plan what you want to say
- express yourself clearly
- lay out your text in a way that makes it easy to read.

In short, it has helped you to communicate professionally, effectively and persuasively. But as Nisha pointed out, putting your words onto paper isn't the end of your job. You must still take time to check what you have written. She suggests putting your work aside for a time and returning to it later. This is a good idea. You will read it again with fresh eyes. Ask your colleagues, too, particularly if you are writing something important.

The grammar and spelling checker in your word processing package will help to pick up obvious mistakes in your writing, but if you still feel uncertain about expressing yourself grammatically, then find yourself a good self-study grammar book. Ask for advice in your Learning Resource Centre if you have access to one.

Signing off

Writing is a skill. Reading and analysing what other people have written will deepen your understanding of what makes for persuasive writing. But like any other skill, you have to practise it yourself in order to improve. The encouraging thing is that the more you practise, the easier it becomes, and the better you get.

Good luck.

Further Reading

Krystyna Weinstein, *Writing Works: A Manager's Alphabet*, Institute of Personnel and Development, IPD House, Camp Road, London SW19 4UX.

Notes

Notes