## INTRODUCTION

A writer writes for readers. Engaging the reader at the start and holding the reader’s interest through the writing is the epitome of good writing. The writer’s goal is to finish with a satisfied reader.

Always start with **First things first**: what is the **purpose** of your writing? Are you preparing a press release? A news story? Or a feature concerning women’s ministries for a newspaper or magazine? Are you writing a devotional?

Next clarify, who is your **audience**? Knowing your **audience** helps you to determine the **strategy** you will use. What is the age of your readers? Are you dealing mostly with women who hold professional careers or stay at home moms, or both? Do you know anything specific that your audience holds in common (i.e. from a rural area, tendency to appreciate health related issues or maybe child-care issues…)? Learn everything you can about your audience so you can more easily reach their interests.

Now – let’s take a quick look at some of the types of writing that you may use at some point. (Each of the following will be discussed in more detail later in the seminar or we’ve provided a descriptive hand out in your packet.)

* **A Press Release** is a concise announcement of an upcoming event such as a women’s seminar on money management. It should be no more than one page in length, double-spaced and typed, unless the event is highly notable.
* **A News Story** or newsbreak is a story of current public interest to a broad audience, with or without pictures. It can precede an important upcoming event, especially if the public is clamoring to read about it and someone of note is quoted. However, most news stories cover an event that has happened.
* **A Newspaper Feature Story** always includes pictures and there is more license to write with description.
* **A Magazine Feature Story** also includes pictures or other graphics and usually gives even more room for creativity.

**Leaders Note:** A newspaper feature and a magazine feature are very similar. The main differences are that the magazine feature allows for a more leisurely approach and the author is usually able to take a subjective stand on what they are writing. (Newspapers prefer the facts, without opinions.)

* **Narrative Writing** is a manner of writing when your, or another person’s viewpoint, is the highlight. Description, exposition and dialogue are included.
* **A Devotional** is written to serve as a motivator, to turn the reader’s attention to God. It is usually written from a personal experience or the writer’s response to the experience of someone else.

All manuscripts should be double-spaced, except for radio and television releases, which are triple-spaced. You can request guidelines from the magazine/devotional editor of your choice. Place your name and phone number on the upper left side of your first page.

# Getting in Shape

You would not go mountain climbing or run a marathon without getting in shape. Likewise, you need to strengthen your writing “muscles.” You can’t expect writing to be enjoyable unless you stay in shape!

Getting started is often the most difficult part of writing. The blank page seems daunting; how can we fill it with creative words? Following are a few exercises that will help you stay in shape and can be helpful if you ever find yourself experiencing “writer’s block.” Try doing at least one of these exercises on a daily basis to keep your writing muscles flexible.

**Exercises:**

1. Sit in a place where you can watch people passing by. Begin writing without checking yourself along the way. Focus on writing a description of all that you see and all that happens. Take notice of sizes, shapes, and any other visual details. You will be amazed at how much this increases your ability to “notice things” that you might have missed before.

2. Write continuously as you listen to a musical selection or a non-narrative film (such as a nature/worship video set to music). Associate freely. What are you reminded of? What are your responses? This is an excellent opportunity to spend your devotional or prayer time in a creative way!

3. Practice a two-minute writing test. Choose anything to write over and over, it could even be your name. See how many times you can write it in two minutes. You can even use a scripture text that you want to memorize – but keep in mind the goal is to write it as many times as possible in two minutes. Do this on a daily basis and watch your ability grow!

4. Practice what is known as “free writing.” Many writers use this anytime they are having “writers block.” You want to develop the ability to be “free” in your writing – we’ll discuss that more in just a few moments. Take pen and paper and allow yourself at least 10-15 minutes. Now, choose a topic, any topic, and just begin writing, allowing yourself to just say whatever comes to mind about the topic. Don’t worry about how the end product will look; just let your mind work and yours hands flow. Completely discard the tendency to make a judgment about a thought before you write it down.

How do you choose a topic? Really, choose anything! One person mentioned that she had once written a three- page paper about a paper clip! With your first attempt or two, try one of the following: toilet paper, fire truck, or chocolate milkshake – have fun! You do not have to choose a topic that is directly related to what you are planning to do for an article; the purpose of this exercise is to free your mind. You will often be writing along and all of a sudden you will think of the angle you want to use on the article. Try it!

Make a goal of being able to write for fifteen minutes without any hesitation and then for an hour with two short breaks. While you’re building up to this time frame keep the pen moving without stopping to think. If you run out of things to write, write repeatedly, “I can’t think of anything to write” until more ideas pop into your head. This will keep you fit and healthy as a writer!

Ok – now for the opportunity you’ve all been waiting for! Let’s try our hand at a

**Free Writing Exercise**: You’ll find a blank sheet of paper in your packet. On the top of the sheet write the word **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (Note: Leader choose one of the following or give your own suggestion: ink pen, marshmallow, brownie, telephone, cotton ball, sticky note…).**

Leader: I’ll give you just five minutes and I want you to write as much as you can think of on this subject. Remember if your mind goes blank just write “I can’t think of anything to write” until an idea does come. Relax and have fun with this – no one will have to show their paper or read it out loud unless you volunteer to share.

So, let’s get started! You’ll have 5 minutes to do this exercise.

**(Note: Give them 5 minutes and then ask for their response to the activity – maybe someone would read theirs. Most importantly, you’ll receive comments about the exercise itself such as: it was helpful, it was hard, I was surprised at** **how much I could write…)** You’ll need to limit the response time to just five minutes or so.)

Now we’re going to cover several suggestions that will help you to develop the kind of readable, memorable writing that readers yearn to read and editors clamor to receive:

**1**. **Write Freely**

As you begin your article don’t be concerned with the mechanics of writing. Let it flow. Write as you feel and what you know about the subject. You want the reader to feel and know about the subject as you do.

All too often we, as writers, allow ourselves to get bogged down with details earlier in the process than what we need. Sometimes we’re too concerned with every jot and title, every coma. The rewriting process, which comes later, will take care of such editing. In the beginning you want to let your creativity flow!

**Be sure you know what your focus is.**

The first thing you always want to do in anything you write is to **capture the attention** **of your audience**. What is the most important point you want to convey? That’s where you start writing. Let’s use an example. The scenario: You are writing a feature for the *Adventist Review* about Women’s Ministries titled “Adventist Big Sisters Help Single Moms in Birmingham.”

You will want to cover the **who**, **what**, **why** of the story, as well as where and when it occurred. With this particular story you will want to include the how.

Example: Here’s a suggested attention-getter to begin an article for the *Adventist Review*.

Seven bright-eyed girls, ages 12-17, laugh a lot these days as they enjoy fun-filled times with their big sisters. Their sisters aren’t related to them. They aren’t kids either. They are thirty-ish women, members of the Birmingham, Maryland, Adventist Church.

Two years ago, the Women’s Ministries Department of the church met to brainstorm community outreach ideas. One of the members, who was reared in a motherless home, suggested the idea of Adventist Big Sistering. The women snatched up the idea.

Now let’s see if we covered the main questions:

* Who? Adolescent girls and big sisters
* What? Adventist big sisters program of the Birmingham SDA Women’s Ministries
* Where? Birmingham, Maryland
* When? Current, started two years ago
* Why? Desire to help young girls in motherless/fatherless homes
* How? A one-on-one social-friendship ministry

With the focus on the 7 girls and the fact that their lives are happier because of this program, we, as readers, were anxious to hear about the rest of the story. Whenever you put the focus on children you are sure to get the reader’s attention.

1. **Write with energy!**

(Choose active words – you want to avoid lazy words and clichés.)

Writers are like gardeners. For a garden to flourish, the writer needs to pull out the weeds. What are the writer’s weeds? Lazy, passive words. These are verbs, which tell instead of show.

The most common offenders (weeds) are:  **is, was, were, can, has, have, had, been, should, would, could** —any of the “to be” words. They really are like weeds; they choke out the real meaning a writer wants to show.

Too many “ands” can choke a manuscript quickly, as well. The word count on a word processor or computer will show you exactly how many words you have used and how many times each word was used. If “and” is at the top of the count, beware!

The exception to “and” is when it is used within quotes. A person’s quotes are not a part of the writer’s created text. If the person you interview uses too many ands, you will be able to edit as needed.

Passive (or lazy) writing suffocates creative writing. Be careful. Some of the lazy words may be like poison ivy for your manuscript.

Let’s look at an example of replacing lazy words with action words:

(This is also an example of a cliché but we’ll discuss clichés in a moment.)

“It was a dark and stormy night….”

“It was” weakens the impact of the scene, as well as “and.” Look at how much more effective the following is:

“Stormy darkness gripped the night….”

Here two changes occur, a night storm finds vivid expression (stormy darkness) and the sentence is reduced to five words instead of seven.

A key for every writer to remember: **wherever possible,** **replace each lazy word in your manuscript with an action word.** Notice the use of “gripped” in the illustration. Can you envision stormy darkness gripping night?

A good rule here is to count how many lazy words your manuscript holds. **For a double-spaced page** (always double-space for editorial use) **there should be a maximum of three or four lazy words.** Just for information, most beginning writer’s manuscripts contain about 30-40 on a page!

The best way to eliminate these weeds is to take a copy of your work and circle every weak word (preferably with red pen!), then replace that word with an appropriate action word. Remember, you want to show instead of tell, and to say everything you want to say in as few words as possible while getting your message across clearly.

Now, let’s look at clichés. Clichés are certain death to a manuscript. It might pass in dialogue, but not in the rest of the text.

**What is a cliché?**

It is a much **overused** word or phrase. Most of us often think and talk in clichés and stereotypes. Clichés are a kind of mental and oral shorthand, allowing us to create quick images without having to work at it. (Needle in a haystack. Busy as a bee, Straight as an arrow. Throw caution to the winds.) But don’t let the clichés go from thought to paper. If it sounds too familiar to you, strike it from your copy.

Observe the examples you have in your notes. Notice how we use them almost without thinking, in both speech and writing:

Cliché—*Once in a blue moon* Change—It rarely happens

Cliché—He*’*s *the pick of the crop* Change—He’s the best choice

Cliché—Johnny looks *fit as a fiddle* Change--Johnny appears robust

Cliché—He *looks like something* Change--He looks bedraggled

*the cat dragged in*

Multiple Clichés—With *reckless abandon, in no time flat,* the boy made *a complete disaster* of his toys

Change—Swiftly and uncaring, the boy ruined his toys

In addition to watching out for word snares, keep your dictionary and thesaurus close by as you write. These are like extra arms for a writer.

**3. Brevity of Words**

Long sentences or paragraphs don’t hold a reader’s attention. Writing tight is the modern way to write in any language.

**Tight writing** is using as few words as necessary to convey the message or information. Not only do you need to get rid of the lazy and extraneous words, but unnecessary description and redundant words. We’ll look at some examples of redundant words in just a moment.

We can see an example of the need for writing tight in this opening for a devotional reading titled, *Baby Sarah*:

*The squeaking, shaking, three-pound baby cried almost continuously and even when sleeping she twitched all the while. Her constant crying and violent twitching all tore at Maria’s heart.*

*Maria, a neo-natal nurse, specially trained in the care of babies born to drug-addicted mothers, ached for the newborn’s anguish. The baby’s squeak-like cries and twitching subsided some when she was put in a dark corner of the hospital nursery.*

*Maria didn’t know it then, but this abandoned baby would change Maria’s life—and mind forever.*

Let’s look at how this story was tightened:

*Darkness and the hum of the hospital nursery provided a measure of calm for three-pound, drug-addicted Baby Sarah. Her pitiful squeaks and violent twitching tore at Maria’s heart.*

*Maria, a neo-natal nurse, didn’t know then how this abandoned newborn would change her life—and mind forever.*

What changes did we make?

1. Opening scene tells where, what, why, who, when
2. The dark corner scene was moved to the beginning, rather than being almost lost in the end of the second paragraph in the first version
3. Personalizing: using the nursery-assigned-name—Baby Sarah
4. Word count reduced almost in half. This draws the story together quickly, cozying the information
5. Redundant words, synonyms and descriptions eliminated such as twitching, crying, squeaking and Maria’s response to the baby’s cries
6. Thus, the same story is told tightly

Now, let’s take a look at some examples of redundancy. A phrase or sentence is considered redundant when it contains extra, unnecessary, repetitive words. You have a hand out that gives several examples; for now, we’ll just look at a few on overhead. (Cover corrected copy until you discuss it)

A huge throng of people gathered at twelve noon on Easter Sunday to debate the controversial issue. OK – let’s tighten this up. What words are unnecessary?

Huge – because throng refers to a large crowd

Of people – a throng infers people

Twelve – noon is twelve – you don’t need to say it

Sunday – Easter is always on Sunday

Controversial – debate infers controversy

Tightened: A throng gathered at noon on Easter to debate the issue.

Let’s look at these examples: soothing tranquilizer; is in need of; could hold practice – refer to the solutions for each of them.

As just demonstrated, we always need to consider the meaning of words.

Narrow down – solution - narrow

Minor quibble – solution - quibble

Free gift – solution - gift

Practice asking yourself, “Can I say this in less words?” (Cover solutions until there is time for recommendations from the audience)

e.g. other matters that were recommended

solution: other matters were recommended

e.g. two separate buildings

solution: two buildings

Let’s move on to the next suggestion.

**4. Rewrite, Rewrite, Rewrite**

Writing will require **rewriting**. Don’t fall in love with your words! Like choosing a mate wisely, examine the courting words. If they tempt too much, you may be walking down a primrose path instead of to a publisher’s doorstep.

This goes back to the comparison of gardening to writing; here the aspect of pruning comes in. The words may be perfectly fine action words or showing words—but unnecessary for your piece. Appropriate word choices provide a happy marriage between an idea and its written expression.

Go over and over your manuscript, holding every word accountable. Base its worthiness on how necessary it is to your message. Even if you “just love” how you said something, if it isn’t necessary to accomplish your goal, cut it out! As a writer you must train yourself to treat words as tools, not as tiny mirrors to your brilliance and wit. You must force yourself to stand back from your copy and study each sentence, each phrase, and each word on it on its own merits.

If you aren’t pressed for time it is always wise to lay your manuscript aside for a couple of days and then when you come back to it try to read it as though someone else had written it.

**5. Write For The Editor’s Needs**

**Examine** your target publication. Study at least three or four issues of each targeted magazine. Ask for the journal’s guidelines (newspapers have guidelines for press releases, too), expect and accept critique, be willing to change if necessary. Do not plan to be overly attached to every word you have written! Even though you have gone over and over it, most likely the editor will make changes. Rarely is a paper accepted as written!

**6. Teach with your Writing**

An excellent way to determine if what you have written is publishable is to pretend you are presenting material as a teacher to a class. Are you covering the bases for the students? Will the students understand what you are trying to convey? You might ask another set of eyes to approach your manuscript as if she were a student in your class.

**7. Self-Editing**

Before your work is ever submitted for publication you must self-edit. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you review your work:

* Is it too long? Where can I eliminate? Is it too short?
* Are there redundant words or phrases?
* Remove repetitive areas of work—unless there is a substantial reason to retain it.
* Did I slip in any clichés?
* Are there too many of those passive, lazy words? If so, get into action! Start pulling weeds.
* Will my work be more effective if I moved parts around?? Cozy your work.
* Ask yourself, “If I were the editor, would I buy this?”

**8. More Self-Editing**

After all this, you still need to ask yourself some more questions, as you reread your manuscript:

* Will what I have written here reach out to the reader’s needs and interests?
* Is the context clear in all points?
* If quotes are used, are they correct?
* Leaders note: One of the most important rules is to always – always – always – be sure that you spell a person’s name correctly, get their title correctly, and quote them correctly. If you’re not sure, verify!
* Is there a reason for everything that is there?
* Check each paragraph for flow and linkage to its neighbor.
* Check each sentence for weakness.
* Check your grammar.
* Make sure you have no spelling or punctuation problems.
* Now look at each individual word. Is each one the precise word you need? Are some too flabby? Unnecessary?
* Be ruthless with your editing pencil! But, make sure each correction actually improves the copy, editing purely for the sake of editing accomplishes nothing.

Remember, if you’re not careful about the facts and by some chance your work is published with errors, you discredit yourself as a writer.

As you edit and review your work, read it aloud. Usually this verbal review also points out changes you want to make. Keep in mind that even editors need editors. Again, another set of eyes proves invaluable in the editing process.

**Sample Press Release**

At this point, let’s study the aspect of writing press releases because self-editing is quite important here. The editor who receives your work will judge the church or organization you represent by the type of material you submit to the newspaper in a press release. So, keep it top-notch!

Press release:

Your name: Immediate release

Daytime telephone number:

Word count:

**Women’s Stress Seminar At Health Department**

Do you ever feel like a fried piece of meat, pressed between a limp piece of lettuce, a tomato slice and two pieces of half-burned toast?

“The Sandwich Woman” is a no-cost (or if a fee is charged mention it later in the release) seminar to help women cope with the sandwiched feeling. Dr. Eleanor Bussy, a woman’s health specialist, will present the two hour seminar, on Monday, April 10, from 7-9 p.m. at the Moomey Health Department auditorium, 1700 Main Street.

Attendance is limited to 40 so call soon to reserve your space! To register, call 545-9876 by Friday, April 7.

Please note that we addressed the basic questions of who, what, where, when, why, how.

What caught your attention in this press release? If you are a stressed out woman (a sandwich woman) you might think, “This is just what I need.”

Why would this seminar appeal to someone?

The seminar is being held at a public facility, the speaker is a female medical personnel, it’s at a reasonable time, no (or inexpensive) cost, and it quickly establishes a connection with the woman who is feeling stretched in too many directions.

This kind of a press release can catch the attention of newspaper, radio, television editors, and program directors, who might want to obtain interviews for articles, live program coverage, or follow up the program with “after” articles.

**9. Curiosity and Caution**

As you can see, writing is not a lazy woman’s task. It requires much discipline. It also requires two other aspects, which separates the weak-kneed, “wanna-be” writer from a published writer. These two aspects are **curiosity** and **caution.**

If a writer is not curious, she will fail to capture all the information needed for well-rounded writing. A writer must exhibit interest in order to seek out the correct information. You go after information and pay attention to what it is telling because one piece of information will give you ideas on what else to seek. Just like you would check each of the tomato vines in your garden for ripe tomatoes, you want to follow every lead you can think of and gather all the information you can. An unenthusiastic, non-curious writer will bore the reader.

Yet, coupled with curiosity is caution! As you research, inquire, and interview to seek out the facts; keep in mind you rarely use all the information you garner. This is often true with quotes from an interviewee. Do not overburden your manuscript with too much information. But, you want to gather all the information you can so you will have a very clear understanding of your subject and will have lots of great ideas for your article.

Another caution: if you interview someone for information on your subject and the interviewee seems to exaggerate or hedge with questions at any point, urge clarification or delete the statements.

**10. Interviewing for Information**

Successful interviewing – the practice of getting another person to talk freely – is largely an exercise in human relations. The key to an effective interview is to make friends, and the sooner the better. In the first few minutes you want to demonstrate a true interest in the person you are interviewing and what they have to share with you.

The questions you will most want to avoid:

1. Do not ask a question which allows the interviewee to answer with only a **“yes**”or **“no**.” Their response to your question will give you little information. Ask the question in such a way that the interviewee is encouraged to share more information.

Example: You may be interviewing a woman mayor. Don’t ask, “Have you always wanted to be involved in local government?’ As you see, the answer could be simply a “yes” or a “no.” A better question is, “Tell me, please, how did you get interested in local government?”

2. Do not ask a **“leading question**” which manages to strongly suggest what you consider to be the correct answer to give.

Example: “Everyone I’ve interviewed says the Sabbath School program is very well organized. What’s your opinion?” Here you are suggesting to the listener that the correct answer is to say that the Sabbath School program is very well organized. The person may have a different opinion but may not feel comfortable giving a different opinion than what everyone else has given. “Everyone else” may be just one or two people, but the interviewee may be picturing the whole church; who would want to be the one person who stands out?

3. You also want to avoid using a **“loaded question”** which tends to be very manipulative.

Example: “You’re a church leader. At board meeting Joe Smith, the head elder, said that the only way to manage ministry funds would be to have one person manage all the funds rather than allowing each division leader to have access to the funds in their department. That means you won’t be able to manage the funds of your department anymore. What’s your reaction to this?” This will easily cause the church leader to have a negative, defensive attitude. This would be a more appropriate question: “You’re a leader in the church. A discussion at board meeting was held on the concern for how the ministry expense funds are managed. Do you have any ideas on how this needs to be handled?”

**11. Be Patient!**

All of the above advice will help get your work into print—but patience prevails. Realize that not everything you write will make it into print. But, even when a piece does not make it into print you have gained more valuable experience in writing just by going through the process. Keep writing, and rewriting! To take license with a well-known saying, “All good things come to those WRITERS who write while they wait.”

**About the Author**

**Betty Kossick** continues to enjoy an active career as a writer/journalist. Her byline appears in various publications both for the secular press and the religious press. She is a feature writer and columnist for Zephyrhills News and East Pasco News in Zephyrhills, Florida. She's also a columnist for the Florida Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Communication Department.

She and her husband have lived in five states and enjoyed community involvement everywhere they've lived. One of her most treasured recognitions is the annual "Celebrate Women Award," presented to her as woman’s a role model by the O.A.S.I.S./Family Resource Center for Abused Women and Children in Cadillac, Michigan. Her motto is "Others."