

Writing Skills, Part 2

IDEA GENERATION AND FREEWRITING

Do you know the answers to the following questions?

- Does increasing your vocabulary mean that you'll be writing longer sentences?
- What is a thesaurus and how is it different from a dictionary?

You'll find the answers to these and other questions about writing in this section. Right now, let's look at a very important question:

How do you get started?

Even experienced authors who have published many books comment that facing the blank page, or the blank computer screen, is the most difficult part of their task as writers. The writer Clarence B. Kelland was asked how he wrote an estimated 10 million words in 61 years. He replied, "I get up in the morning, torture a typewriter until it screams, then stop." Nowadays, of course, he would torture a computer. On getting started, Bernard Malamud remarked, "The idea is to get the pencil moving quickly." And P. G. Wodehouse said, "I just sit at the typewriter and curse a bit."

How do you get started on this business of writing? Daydreaming helps, and sometimes a pad and pencil if you're not sure of yourself at a computer keyboard. It helps, too, not to fully understand what you're writing about. Often we write to discover what we think, how we feel, how something really works. C. Day Lewis remarked, "We do not write in order to be understood; we write in order to understand."

If you don't know quite what you're going to say, or where to start, that's good! We write to discover. This is true even for those of us who write on our jobs. Let's suppose that you have a job where you might be asked to write something. For example, your supervisor has asked for a report on your last shift. Until you sit down and write about all that was accomplished, you might not understand how much got done. Or suppose your boss asks for an evaluation of your team. When you finish writing, you'll know more about the people you work with than you did when you began.

Writing techniques are useful in almost any job.



Clustering and *freewriting* are good tools the writer can use to help get started. What is *clustering*? The author Gabriele Lusser Rico wrote about this technique in her book *Writing the Natural Way*. Start this exercise with a blank pad of paper and a pencil or pen. Begin with one word at the center of the page. Circle it, and begin to write other words that occur to you, each in its own circle. Radiate the new words out in a circle from the original word. Connect each new word or phrase with a line to the preceding circle. When you have a new idea, begin again with a central word and radiate outward again.

An example of the process given in Rico's book is the central word *narrow*. This word can call to mind: *tube*, *bridge*, *narrow-minded*, *channel*, and other words. This and another example, *hobbies*, are illustrated in Figure 1.

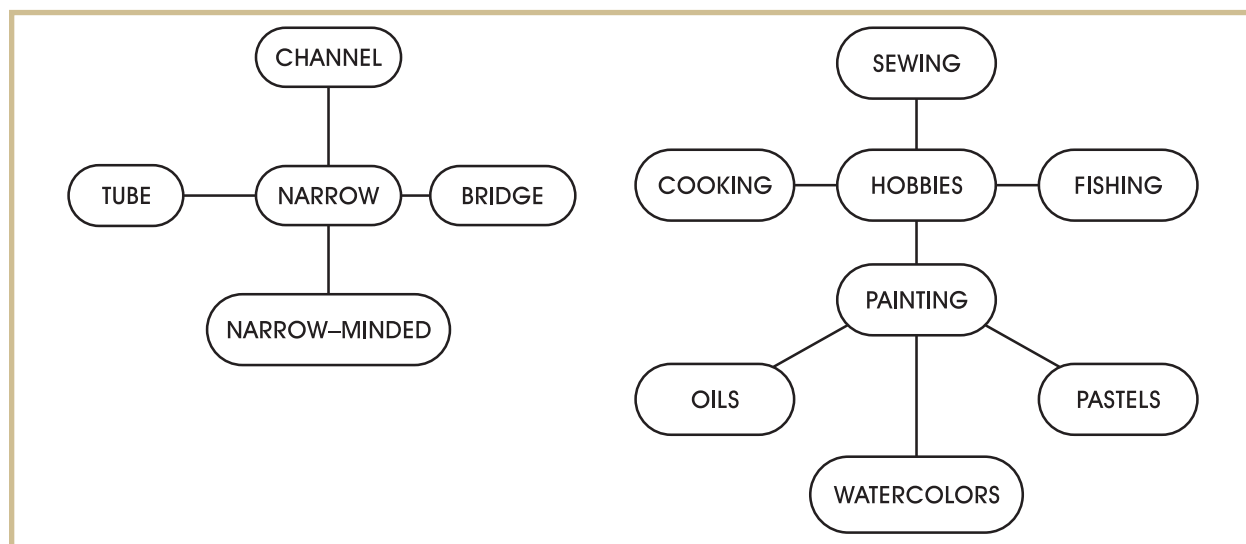


FIGURE 1—Two examples of clustering, which is a useful tool to get you started writing, are shown here.

Once you've completed this clustering process, the words you've generated can suggest sentences or paragraphs for further writing. The clustering serves as a pattern that at last will fall into focus and guide your writing.

Another technique that helps a writer get started is *freewriting*. This is like clustering because you begin by putting down whatever your thoughts are, in no particular order. Here you can start with a pencil and paper or with a typewriter or computer keyboard. The goal is to write for five minutes without stopping. In this exercise, punctuation, spelling, and grammar don't matter. The point is to get the words and ideas down. You can use this exercise by imagining you're writing to a very good friend and saying exactly what's on your mind. The writer John McPhee, who has successfully published more than 30 books on a variety of topics, says that all his manuscripts start the same way: "Dear Mom." Then, when he's done, he crosses out the "Dear Mom," completes his other revisions, and submits the work to his publisher.

Both of these exercises, clustering and freewriting, are designed to get you started, to get you past that first blank page. They can work for "creative" assignments and for work-related writing as well. Suppose you need to write a report for a supervisor about your most recent shift. You could start with clustering.

Once you have the words and ideas, you can start to organize them. Use the methods of organization that we talked about in the first study unit. Begin with a plan, list your thoughts (main ideas), and put your thoughts in order. Structure your paragraphs using your main ideas as the topic sentences and support your topic sentences with facts, reasons, or anecdotes. Remember, however, that it's sometimes very effective to put your most important idea at the end of a paragraph. Since we've already gone over how to create effective paragraphs, in this study unit we're going to concentrate on tricks of the trade, or

methods writers use to make their writing vivid and fun to read. Remember that no one, not even an experienced writer, gets it right the first time. It's impossible to do it all at once.

Remember that you should plan, write a first draft, revise it once, revise it again, and then do a final draft. It's during the revision process that these tricks that we're going to teach you—our inside knowledge—can be put to good use. So what are these tricks? One of them is to make sure you get the most out of the words you use. Words are your tools. Just as you keep your pencil sharp, so too should you keep your vocabulary sharp. Here's how you do that.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF WORDS

Earlier you learned a number of ways to save words, including using suffixes like *-ful* or *-able* to make one word out of four or five or six. You learned how to build time-saving words.

But that trick works only up to a certain point. In our language, you can use the suffix *-ling* to build the word *duckling*, which means a young duck, but you can't write *dogling* to mean a young dog. You can't do it because English has a different word that means a young dog, namely, *puppy*.

In fact, English has taken over and adapted many thousands of words from Latin, Greek, French, and a dozen other languages (Figure 2). So if you want to save words and use a single word instead of a phrase or clause, chances are that there's a ready-made word for it in English. Whenever the language has a word for a certain idea, you need to use that word and not one that you might make up yourself. Otherwise, your reader won't understand what you're saying.

FIGURE 2—Many of our English words have come from other languages.

ENGLISH: A LINGUISTIC MELTING POT

One of the reasons English is so rich is that so many languages have contributed to it. You have only to leaf through a dictionary to see the many sources from which our vocabulary comes. Here is a sampling:

- cosmic—from the Greek *kosmos*
- hope—from the Old English (before 1100) *hopa*
- massage—from the French *masser*
- rodeo—from the Spanish *rodear*
- roll—from the Middle English (before 1500) *roll(en)*
- vocabulary—from the Latin *vocabulum*

Why Increase Your Vocabulary?

Like many other people, you may think that you could write beautifully if you only had a large enough vocabulary—that writing would be easy if you only knew the meaning of all those big words. However, that isn't really so. A great many things are more important in writing than vocabulary. But a large vocabulary does help. Without it, you may forever use six words when one will do.

For instance, suppose you write, "The captain was a big man who was easy to talk to." That's a good, clear sentence. The only thing wrong with it is that you can say the same thing in fewer words. You can't do it by building a word with *-ing* or *-able* or some other suffix; there's no such thing as an easy-to-talk-to-ing man or an easy-to-talk-to-able man. You can save words only if you know a ready-made word that means easy to talk to. If your vocabulary is large enough, you'll know such a word, and you'll write, "The captain was a big, affable man."

Consider another example. How can you shorten the following sentence? "She stood with her hands on her hips and her elbows turned outward, and watched me." Naturally, you can do nothing to shorten the sentence unless you know a word that describes this posture. If you do, you can save seven words and write, "She stood with her arms akimbo and watched me."

Now this doesn't mean that *affable* and *akimbo* are particularly fine words. But they're useful. If you know enough such words, you can pack anything you write brimful with meaning. This brings us back to vocabulary building. How do you go about learning all these thousands and thousands of useful words? How can you build your vocabulary so that you'll have words such as *affable* and *akimbo* ready whenever you need them? Read on and you'll find six steps toward making your vocabulary grow.

The Best Way to Build Vocabulary

Of course, you can build your vocabulary in many different ways, but the following six steps will help you.

Step One: Listen

One way to help your vocabulary grow is to listen very carefully. Often news commentators, announcers, and actors, as well as people you meet daily, will use words that are new to you. Be aware of how each word is used, check its spelling and meaning in the dictionary, and try to make it your own.

Step Two: Read

You can't build a vocabulary without reading. You can't make friends if you stay at home by yourself all the time. In the same way, you can't build a vocabulary if you never meet any new words. And to meet them, you must read. The more you read, the better.

Make a habit of reading a newspaper daily. News articles and editorials will help increase your word power and your knowledge. In addition to newspapers and magazines, you should read novels, history books, do-it-yourself books, or whatever else you like to read. Reading a book a week is a good goal to accomplish. It may be unrealistic to expect to read an entire book every other day or so, but you should read at least part of a book on a daily basis. Keep reading. Keep meeting unfamiliar words on printed pages. Keep getting acquainted with the faces of words.

Step Three: Use the Dictionary

Look up any unfamiliar word in the dictionary, whether you meet the word by listening or reading. Read carefully everything the dictionary says about the word. Study the way the word is pronounced, where it comes from, what it means, and what other words are connected with it. Remember the way the word was used in the sentence in which you found it, and learn that meaning. Compare the word with the words you would have used if you had written the sentence.

For instance, suppose you're looking up the word *genial*, which you found in the sentence, "Erica was a genial hostess." In your dictionary you find that *genial* has three meanings:

1. Sympathetically cheerful; cordial: a *genial* disposition, a *genial* host.
2. Enlivening; supporting life; pleasantly warm or mild: a *genial* climate.
3. Rare: characterized by genius.

The word *genial* has three meanings; but since the dictionary says that the third meaning is rare, you need only study the first two. You read carefully the first definition (sympathetically cheerful; cordial) and find that it's clearly the one you're looking for; it even gives "a genial host" as an example. But the second meaning (enlivening; supporting life; pleasantly warm or mild) also tells you much about the word and helps you to understand more fully the first meaning.

Listed after the meaning of the word, you may find *synonyms* (words similar in meaning) and *antonyms* (words with opposite meanings). The synonyms for *genial* may be *agreeable*, *friendly*, *gracious*, *heartly*, *pleasant*; the antonym, *sullen*. So the complete dictionary entry tells you that a genial hostess is agreeable, friendly, gracious, hearty, pleasant, cheerful, cordial, enlivening—anything but sullen. After you've read

all the dictionary says about the word, you'll have a feeling for the word and the exact shades of meaning it carries.

Let's revisit the sentence, "Erica was a genial hostess." Now you know exactly what this means. Next time you want to describe a host or hostess like Erica, *genial* may be just the right word to use.

Remember, looking up a word in the dictionary won't get you anywhere if you don't remember what you found. If you really want to do something to improve your vocabulary, keep a notebook. Write down words you didn't understand, the sentences in which you found them, and everything in the dictionary that will help you remember what the words mean.



To learn a new word from your reading, follow these steps.

Step Four: Say the Word

Get used to the way the word is pronounced. The pronunciation is printed right after the word in the dictionary using special symbols. If you don't understand the pronunciation symbols, called *diacritical marks*, look at the explanation at the bottom of the page on which the word appears (or on the facing page or back or front of the book).

For example, the word *chamois* is pronounced (sham'ē). See the accent mark (') after the letter *m*? This diacritical mark is placed after the syllable that should be stressed when the word is spoken aloud. Note also the bar (macron) over the *e*. This diacritical mark indicates a long vowel. In the dictionary's pronunciation key, you'll find that a long *e* is pronounced like the *e* in *equal*.

Sometimes, as is in the case of *chamois*, the dictionary may show more than one pronunciation for a word. That means you have a choice, but the one printed first is preferred. Stick to that one. Pronounce the word the way the dictionary says you should, and say it aloud often enough to be sure you won't stumble over it when you use it.

Step Five: Use the Word

Listening, reading, looking up, and pronouncing aren't enough. To add a word to your vocabulary, you must use it. When you get a chance to work a new word into a conversation, do it. Most importantly, use the word in speaking as if it had always been yours. Never mind whether your friends will think you're showing off. Either they know the word anyway, or they'll see that you know something they don't know.

And don't worry about not using the word correctly. If you use the word in just about the same way it was used where you first saw it, there's little danger. And even if you do say something like "a genial party," there's no great harm done. It isn't quite right, because *genial* is ordinarily used only to describe people, but after a while you'll get straightened out on that point by your reading. Meanwhile, *genial* will have become part of your vocabulary.

Step Six: Maintain Your Vocabulary

Remember, knowing words is like knowing people. If you don't keep in touch with them, you lose them. After a while, you may even forget their names. So keep up with your latest word acquaintances. Watch out for them in what you read; look them up again in the dictionary if necessary; keep saying them and using them. This is easy. In fact, you'll find that the words you've just added to your vocabulary will keep cropping up in your reading and your speech. Keep on using them, and watch your vocabulary grow.

The Speaking-Writing Connection

Maybe you wonder why, in a writing course, you should learn how to build a speaking vocabulary. Well, if you really want to add a word to your writing vocabulary, there's no better way than to add it to your speaking vocabulary first. A word isn't really yours until you've said it. Then, when it comes naturally in your speech, it will slip into your writing naturally, too. Often you won't even notice that you've used a new word.

Fun with Words

That's all there is to vocabulary building. We hope you think vocabulary building is fun. It's fun to find out where words come from and how they work, and even more fun to use a new word to say exactly what you mean to say.

For example, do you know the word *tantalize*? It means "to torment or tease by keeping something desired in sight but out of reach, or by holding out hopes that are repeatedly disappointed." That's a lot of meaning packed into one word, isn't it? And there's a whole legend behind the word, about the Greek king Tantalus, who was punished terribly for his sins. He had to stand in water up to his chin, under branches laden with fruit. When he tried to drink or eat, however, the water or fruit went out of reach. *Tantalize* is a useful and meaningful word. When you say that the display behind the bakery counter is tantalizing, you're really saying something!

Or do you know the word *meander*? Doesn't it sound beautiful? It means "wander aimlessly, following a winding course"—like the winding river (now called Menderes) in Asia. Instead of merely walking through the park, try meandering sometime. Your dictionary is full of words like this. And they're worth knowing.

FAD WORDS

At every level of language, new words appear constantly. Such words arise from new technologies, from advertising, from press releases and speeches by figures in government, from the entertainment world, and from different groups of people. Such words spread rapidly because of instant communication means and the mobility of people.

These are fad, or vogue, words. They come and go, like clothing and hairstyles. A very few may remain and become a permanent part of the language. But most of them will disappear in a matter of weeks or months to be replaced by the latest "in" word.

You'll probably use such words many times in your life. Everyone does. But don't be enslaved by them. Build your vocabulary to such a point that you won't have to use fad words unless you really want to.



The Write Stuff 1

At the end of each section of *Writing Skills, Part 2* you'll be asked to check your understanding of what you've just read by completing a "The Write Stuff." Writing the answers to these questions will help you review what you've learned so far. Please complete *The Write Stuff 1* now.

1–5: Match the words on the left with their definitions on the right. Indicate your choices in the spaces provided. You may use a dictionary.

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| _____ 1. cajole | a. to talk bombastically |
| _____ 2. harangue | b. to evade the truth or the point at issue by arguing over trifles |
| _____ 3. quibble | c. to express oneself at considerable length |
| _____ 4. whine | d. to talk coaxingly and flatteringly |
| _____ 5. rant | e. to complain in a childish, fretful manner and in a nasal tone |

Check your answers with those on page 41.

WORD FLAVORS

Most new words in your vocabulary will be word savers, but many of them will do even more than save words. They'll enable you to say two things at the same time. You think that can't be done? Then look at the following example.

When it was time for lunch, Johnny devoured two peanut butter sandwiches.

See what the word *devoured* does here? First of all, it says that Johnny ate the two sandwiches; that's what the sentence is about. Second, the word *devoured* shows how Johnny ate those sandwiches. It tells you that he ate them quickly and hungrily. So the word does say two things at the same time.

How is it possible that a word can mean two things at once? The explanation is simple: The word has been used so often together with certain other words that it has taken on some of their flavor. For instance, *to devour* has been used so often in speaking and writing about animals that by now it means not only eating, but eating like an animal. Thousands of other words have been used so often in certain ways that they carry with them all sorts of *connotations*—things that