Developing reports - Tips for writing clearly & effectively

Plain writing communicates meaning accurately, immediately and effectively. Workplace writing is effective insofar as it contains information that is useful to the reader(s).

Things to Do

Understand your task
Lack of understanding is a common cause of confused writing, (eg. rambling sentences, jumbled paragraphs, vagueness). Unless you understand clearly what you have to do, you can't hope to write plainly about it. Before you begin, ask yourself:
- What has to be done? Why?
- For whom? In what form?

Ways to clarify understanding include:
- asking, conferring, consulting (NB: Refer to those who should know!)
- brainstorming, doodling, 'free writing', outlining, note taking
- using a 'critical friend'
- making diagrams, drawings, flowcharts, lists, summaries
- reading instructions and checking requirements

The earlier efforts to clarify understandings are made the more likely they are to be effective. In the early stages of writing, you are more likely to be receptive to comments and ideas of others and be able to make changes easily. At first, concentrate on putting down ideas and information without assigning value to them. If you are unsure about how or where to begin, just start writing, i.e. 'free write'. As you do, your understanding should become clearer and you can start grouping like points. (Try to keep all your preliminary notes and jottings. Refer back to them as your writing develops to ensure nothing important has been overlooked).

Write for your reader(s)
- Who is the reader? (e.g. influence, position, etc.)
- How informed is the reader?
- What background information will the reader need? (eg. circumstances, conditions, history, local context.)
- How does the reader want to use what you write?
- What writing style is appropriate? (NB: If background information interrupts the flow of your writing, include it in footnotes and/or appendices.).

Write as you speak
Use words you ordinarily speak and hear wherever possible. If you can't hear yourself saying it, then don't see yourself writing it.

Put first things first
Give the most prominence and space to what is most important. When writing a report, put the most important information first.

Arrange your points logically
Logical organisation is the basis of clarity. Ways to do this include: advantages/disadvantages; ascending/descending order; causes/effects; chronology; general/specific; priority; proximity; significance. (Where items are of equal importance and/or there is no preferred order, arrange alphabetically.)

For more information, view the section on Organising your Writing in the Planning and Evaluation Wizard.

Write direct sentences
Ways to do this include:
- Using strong verbs rather than overused adjectives. Many commonly used adjectives have lost their impact. Words like magnificent, wonderful, and interesting mean very little. Reserve your adjectival sledge hammers for when they actually mean something.
- Using the active rather than passive voice. The active voice indicates the subject is doing the action of the verb. The move is from subject to verb to object (where there is an object). eg: The director will return incomplete forms.
  The passive voice indicates the action is taking place but not necessarily who or what is committing the action. eg: "Incomplete forms will be returned by the director". Active voice sentences are more direct and forceful than passive voice ones.
- Keeping sentences correct and simple. Keep sentences short. Use two sentences rather than join with 'and'. Have only one idea or point per sentence. Make sure subject agrees with verb. Be unfailingly consistent with person and tense.
- Being specific. Instead of writing "If numbers continue to increase at the present rate, more staff will be needed in the future. ", write "Two further staff will be required from 1st January if increased enrolments continue, i.e. from 85 in August to 120 in October.

Distinguish fact from opinion
Instead of writing "An acceptable discharge rate is being maintained, with 61% of patients returning home within two days.", write "61% of patients return home within two days. Medical staff consider this acceptable."

Use conventions as guidelines rather than rules
Use writing conventions to support and strengthen your writing. 'Do's' don't mean always and 'Don'ts' don't mean never. Your first responsibility is to write to achieve your goals, i.e. accurate, immediate, effective communication.

Review, revise and re-write
Writing is an art. Editing is a craft. Both take time. Check progressively for accuracy and appropriateness, particularly of facts, spelling and sentence construction. Seek the advice and opinion of others. Remove all unnecessary words and information from finished copy.