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Warlord's Writing Tips

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Title

Pick a title that is descriptive and short. That first step is imperative, because it essentially determines what the document is all about.

Mission

Tack the writing mission on the wall and keep it constantly in sight. Disregard all tangential topics, no matter interesting or important they may be.

Outlines

Prepare outlines even for short papers, so all relevant subjects are displayed in a logical sequence. Start with a skeleton outline, then add subtopics and outline each of them. Revise as you progress (outlines are a lot like contingency plans, which seldom are implemented the way their architects originally conceived).

Basic Subdivisions

Professional books, magazine articles, substantial reports, and other official papers most often should comprise three parts, even if informally:

Background, Purpose, and Scope

- Background information up front briefly explains why the subject is important.
- One or more sharply defined purposes identify central objectives.
- The scope tells readers what topics to expect and what not to expect.

Main Body

- The main body, which discusses all pertinent points, establishes a solid foundation.

Wrap-Up

- Conclusions, culminating comments, recapitulation or whatever you care to call it leave readers with the ultimate message. The wrap-up never should address topics not previously discussed.

Research Techniques

- Peruse a broad spectrum of opinion with an open mind. Never reach conclusions first, then prepare a paper to support them. You will often find that initial impressions were poorly founded.
- Take nothing for granted. Challenge conventional wisdom to see if it is sound, regardless of the source.
- Document important ideas with footnotes, so readers can pursue selected topics in greater depth, if they so desire.

Writing Techniques

- An introductory quotation that precedes paragraph 1 on page 1 of a relatively short document or opens chapters of a longer one can establish themes, particularly if tied directly to the text.
- The lead sentence and paragraph should capture reader interest immediately. You may not get a second chance.
- Understatement usually is preferable to “overkills” called hyperbole (never use a mallet to drive a tack).
- Acknowledge opposing views and critique them. That way you answer questions before skeptics ask them.
- Use common terms, so all readers can proceed without constant reference to a dictionary. Avoid unnecessary use of foreign words. Employ acronyms sparingly.
- Mix simple with complex sentences that are neither staccato nor excessively long, so the document reads smoothly.
- Keep it simple, so all readers can understand complex subjects (when my son was six years old he had a book that basically explained Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity).
- Be clear and concise, but never sacrifice clarity for brevity. Never use 10 words when one or two say the same thing equally well or better.

- Be precise. Pick every word carefully.
- Emphasize active voice. Open each sentence with a primary thought, then follow with appropriate modifiers (although, however, but, yet) as required.
- Never open sentences with a conjunction (and, but).
- Use a thesaurus to avoid undesirable repetition and quotation books to help add spice (your best ideas will get lost if presentations are boring).
- Use topic headings as “road signs,” so the writer as well as readers know where they have been, where they are, where they are headed at all times.

Review Techniques

- Few writers produce perfect first drafts, so rewrite each paragraph until it is the best you can produce.
- Be your own sharpest critic. Read out loud what you wrote to see how it sounds.
- Solicit comments from knowledgeable peer reviewers. Pay attention if they disagree or don’t understand, particularly if more than one find similar faults. Otherwise, you unnecessarily risk public embarrassment after the document is published.
- Proof carefully.

Culminating Comments

Consider the bullets above to be starting points. Add, subtract, and otherwise revise as you see fit until you possess writing tips that suit your particular style, then use them as a checklist to improve future products.

John M. Collins began to amass military experience when he enlisted in the Army as a private in 1942. Thirty years and three wars later, in 1972, he retired as a colonel. He spent the next quarter century as the leading analyst on military and defense issues at the Congressional Research Service. Ten years ago, he established the Warlord Loop, a by-invitation-only e-mail forum that fosters voluminous, freewheeling exchanges seven days a week.

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