



# Pencils Down How To Implement a Team Writing Process

By Anna Martinovich, CPSM

As with most creative endeavors, writing can seem magically pulled from thin air to blossom on paper on its own. But writers know that's not quite how it works, and definitely not while writing as part of a team.

Part of the creative growth in team writing includes setting up processes you didn't know you needed. If you've ever been stuck in a never-ending email string of back-and-forth edits, suggestions, and "what if we try" comments, it's time to implement a process and get everyone on the same page.

My firm recently embarked on a writing process overhaul to improve and clearly define the entire process. Here are some of our best practices and lessons learned.

## Start With a Spreadsheet and a Plan

In a perfect world, your team will set goals and major ideas in the beginning, with input and buy-in from everyone. Roles need to be clearly delineated from the start with everyone on board with the plan.

We first broke up the writing process into three buckets or steps: writing, editing, and proofreading. Next, we assigned names, due dates, and roles on a spreadsheet, to make sure everyone knew how and when they needed to get involved.

**The Writer:** This individual holds ultimate responsibility for the piece of writing and has final say on editing decisions.

**The Editor:** Once the writer has pulled a first draft together, the editor cleans up the writing. He or she also provides sound, big-picture feedback.

**The Proofreader:** This is your details person and ideally the last person to make changes to a piece of writing.

## Be Crystal Clear

One big success for my firm was including the text below in our communications whenever asking people to work on their part in the process. Each step includes different skillsets and requires a different type of attention, so be clear with specific goals and suggestions. If you're writing a piece on your own, these are great guidelines to implement in your own process.

## The Writing Process

- **Outline Major Goals and Facts.** Who are you writing for? What do they want to know about your topic and why? What are the main points you want to communicate? Write them down.
  - **Outline Your Themes.** Create a list of descriptive keywords to use consistently throughout your piece. If writing about a project, composing a list of words that
- describe the project helps when searching for adjectives.
  - **Identify Your Organizational Theme.** Now that you have your facts and themes, what weaves them together to create a story? Are you taking the reader through a design space? Is the piece explaining a collaborative process? All writing needs to have a clear beginning, middle, and end to ensure cohesiveness.
  - **Just Write It Down.** At a certain point you just have to start writing. Some writers choose to start with the middle section, then the introduction, and ending. Reference your goals, facts, themes, and organizational structure. It's OK to change things if you figure out your organizational theme isn't working, but make sure you change it through the entire piece.
  - **Step Away and Look on a Different Platform.** Once you've got an initial draft, take a half an hour away from your writing. Then come back and look at it on a different screen or in print. These simple shifts can help reveal things you originally thought were clear. Check your goals, facts, themes, and organizational structure again.
  - **Edit Yourself.** Delete repetitive statements, explain industry jargon, and avoid weak sentence structure. If the writing includes processes

or steps that were taken, which my firm calls a “what we did” list, explain the reasons behind them.

## The Editing Process

- **Suggest Changes, but Avoid Rewriting.** Editing often walks a thin line. It's fine to add wording suggestions, general comments, needed explanations, or to ask questions for more clarification. But you need to make sure the author's voice still shines.
- **Look for an Overarching Theme, or Story.** Is there a clear beginning, middle, and end to the story? In general, is there an overarching organizational factor that keeps the reader wanting to find out what's next? If not, suggest a change in theme or structure.
- **Keep an Eye Out for “What We Did” Lists.** Ensure sentences have a clear cause and effect. If using a list, elaborate the purpose of each item or step, and specifically address what challenge was overcome.
- **Delete Repetitive Statements.** Using the same word several times in a sentence or paragraph is jarring for readers. Additionally, repeating your point in different words isn't a good way to emphasize it, and you risk losing the reader's attention.
- **Cut the Unneeded Fluff.** Evaluate the value of each statement, what my team called the “four U's.” Is the language ultra-specific? Is it unique? Is it useful? Is it urgent? Suggest using fewer words if it makes the message more concise and clear. Look closely at introductions and closings. Do they summarize, or repeat and muddy the message?
- **Spell Out Industry Jargon.** If someone in a different industry won't know an acronym or concept, it's best to explain. In fact, spelling out the term name first, followed by the acronym, alleviates confusion for the reader.

- **Strengthen Waffle Words and Sentence Structures.** Restructure sentences that use passive voice

or helping verbs and instead use stronger, more specific wording. For example, compare “We tried to create a design that ...” to “We designed a ...”

## The Proofreading Process

- **Read Words Aloud To Catch Errors.** When you read your writing out loud, you'll catch most spelling errors, skipped words, and pesky word-use errors such as “in” versus “is” or “an” versus “and.”
- **Repeat Key Words Consistently.** Check words that repeat throughout the document for consistent usage, for example, Health care versus health-care. Consult the company's style guide or query the writer if the choice is unclear. In some cases, all of the style options could be correct, but inconsistency is not.
- **Use Correct Punctuation.** We've all seen how punctuation can drastically change the meaning of a sentence, for example, “Let's eat, grandma,” versus “Let's eat grandma.” You may also consider the use of the Oxford comma (including a comma before “and” in a series: me, myself, and I) for clarity.
- **Pay Attention to Capitalization.** Titles, proper nouns, and acronyms should be capitalized. Avoid capitalizing random words just for emphasis.
- **Polish the Final Details.** Spell out numbers one through nine. Then it's 10, 11, and 12. Pay attention to noun-verb agreements. In a perfect world, proofreading matches company standards for consistency.

## Be Flexible but Firm

How many times does the editor get to make comments? What if there are three writers? What happens when someone asks to take a final look and comes back with major changes?

After getting a first draft from the writer, a great starting point for smaller pieces looks like: one round of input from the editor, a chance for



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the writer to implement changes, one round for the proofreader, and then out the door.

If you're consistently getting major changes from someone at the end, volunteer him or her to be an editor instead. On the flipside, if someone just can't help but correct spelling errors and has an eye for grammar, volunteer them to proofread. Once you appreciate the skills of your writing team, you can better suggest people to participate according to their strengths.

If you're writing a piece all on your own, keep the stages of the writing process distinct as you go through them. You'll typically find a decrease in time spent and an increase in the quality of the written work.

The final important takeaway here is that everyone on your writing team needs to learn and understand the need for best practices and consistency. Ultimately, great results in writing come from a little bit of planning. ■



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