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Applying the Principles of Business Writing

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Acknowledgements

Having grown up in a multicultural and multilingual environment, language has always been the best way for me to make sense of myself and the world. I love the raw power, elegance and versatility of language, and not a day goes by in which I don't play or work with words. Looking back, it seems only natural that my passion has become my profession.

To me, writing is a natural process that is inherently intuitive. I visualise, go by my gut feeling and listen to the sonic quality of language. With these resources at my disposal – and a decade of professional writing experience – the writing sometimes seems to happen by itself. But my way of working has an underlying structure that, I realised, I could try to teach others.

This book was born of the desire to identify that underlying structure. While this seemed like a pretty straightforward task, I have to confess it has been frustrating and challenging. I am sure, that like me, you will appreciate the irony of a professional writer having difficulty writing about his writing. Luckily for me, I found friends, relatives and clients willing to help me see this project through. They challenged my ideas and gave me constructive feedback on anything from style to structure.

For this, I want to express deep gratitude to Julia Balandina at American International Group; Lindsay Bogaard at Bogaard Arena; Thijs Westerkamp, Ronald Meijers and Steffi Gande at Krauthammer International; Heidi Does at TNT Logistics, Annedien Hoen at Annedienhoen.nl, Lucy Lambriex at Lab Lambriex, Cindy van Roon at Lexbridge, Branka van Roon at The Excellent Leadership Company, Marjolijn Dijksterhuis at Mea, Tari Habbitt and Dennis Larsen at ReputationInc and Iben Molenkamp.

Special thanks goes out to Rob Leenders and his team at Made of Man, who used their talents to design a compelling visual counterpart to my book. Rob and I met at the Masters in Corporate Communication programme at RSM Erasmus University, which allowed us to combine design and language in strategic business communication.

Introduction

Consider the vast amount of text that your organisation produces. Picture the sea of memos and the stack of reports you receive on an annual basis. Or think of the countless e-mails, presentations and plans you write for your colleagues. Business writing, the process by which such texts are created, is a pervasive activity within any organisation.

This internal dialogue – much like the human brain that spends most of its energy talking to itself – has tremendous impact on your organisation's ability to compete. Good business writing captures knowledge, aligns people with the organisation's strategy, and catalyses organisational change. It can also be a superb tool for corporate communication and sales purposes.

In my experience, there are two reasons why organisations do not make optimal use of business writing. First of all, most aren't adjusting quickly enough to the fact that stakeholders are becoming fed up with spin doctoring and corporate doublespeak. Employees, customers and investors are increasingly demanding clear communication and organisations unable to comply run the risk of alienating these crucial allies.

A second obstacle is that few employees are trained to write about the complex issues that characterise business. Writing is not an arcane form of art, but a skill like leadership that matures with training and experience. Writing talent helps, but good writing is essentially built on thorough preparation and disciplined execution. This means that anyone can learn to write at a reasonable level of proficiency.

This book aims to improve your writing skills by teaching you how to use the principles of business writing. These principles – focus, purpose, meaning, substance, structure, clarity and humility – have been derived from my work as a journalist, copywriter, corporate communication specialist and business writer. They reflect my experience of what works and my personal views of how business writing should be used within the organisation.

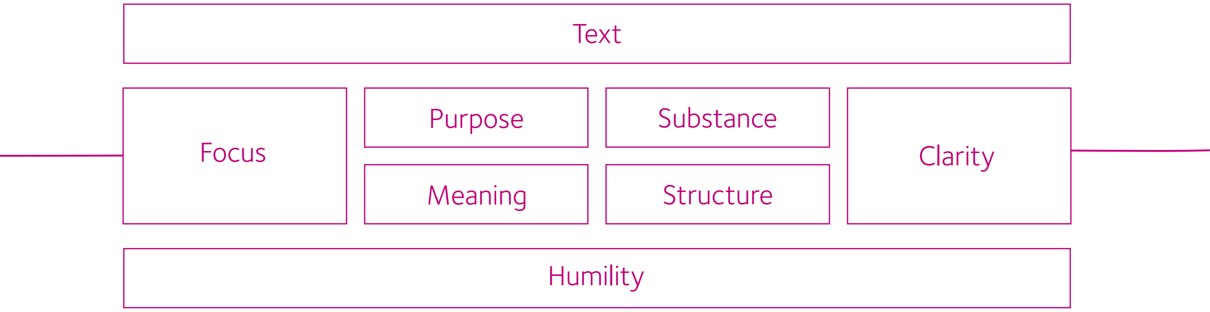
The book combines a conceptual approach with a practical one to help you more fully integrate what you will learn into your daily work. The principles – specifically what they mean and how they can be applied – are discussed individually and presented as

a coherent model that mirrors issues facing modern organisations. The book also suggests how to apply the principles to day-to-day business topics, and explains how to manage the writing process from beginning to end.

You can use the principles in this book to communicate about leadership, change, culture and other strategic business issues. The principles will allow you to create a sense of shared purpose among stakeholders and capture valuable knowledge. The book also teaches writing strategies that you can apply to anything from simple memos to complex proposals. Mastery of this system will make you self-reliant, more insightful and more effective when it comes to business writing.

Language is a powerful kind of magic. This book is an attempt to identify its underlying structure in the context of business and present it in a way that is easy to understand. It is by no means definitive or without fault, even though I have done my utmost to apply these principles to the book itself. Whatever you think of the principles, I hope you will find in them something that helps you write better than you have written before.

Ilja van Roon
April 2006


Text
Focus
Purpose
Substance
Meaning
Structure
Clarity
Humility

Overview
of the principles of business writing

Focus

Adjust the scope and scale of your writing to influence the attitude and behaviour of your readers. Develop a brief and outline, execute these consistently.

Purpose

Identify the purpose of what you are writing about and connect it to your readers' values, beliefs and ambitions. Avoid buzzwords, embrace relationships and use sensory language.

Meaning

Be precise in your use of language. Do not write what something is, explain what it means to people and the organisation.

Substance

Empower and respect your readers by allowing them to critically evaluate your claims. Elaborate or provide verifiable proof, ideally from independent outsiders.

Structure

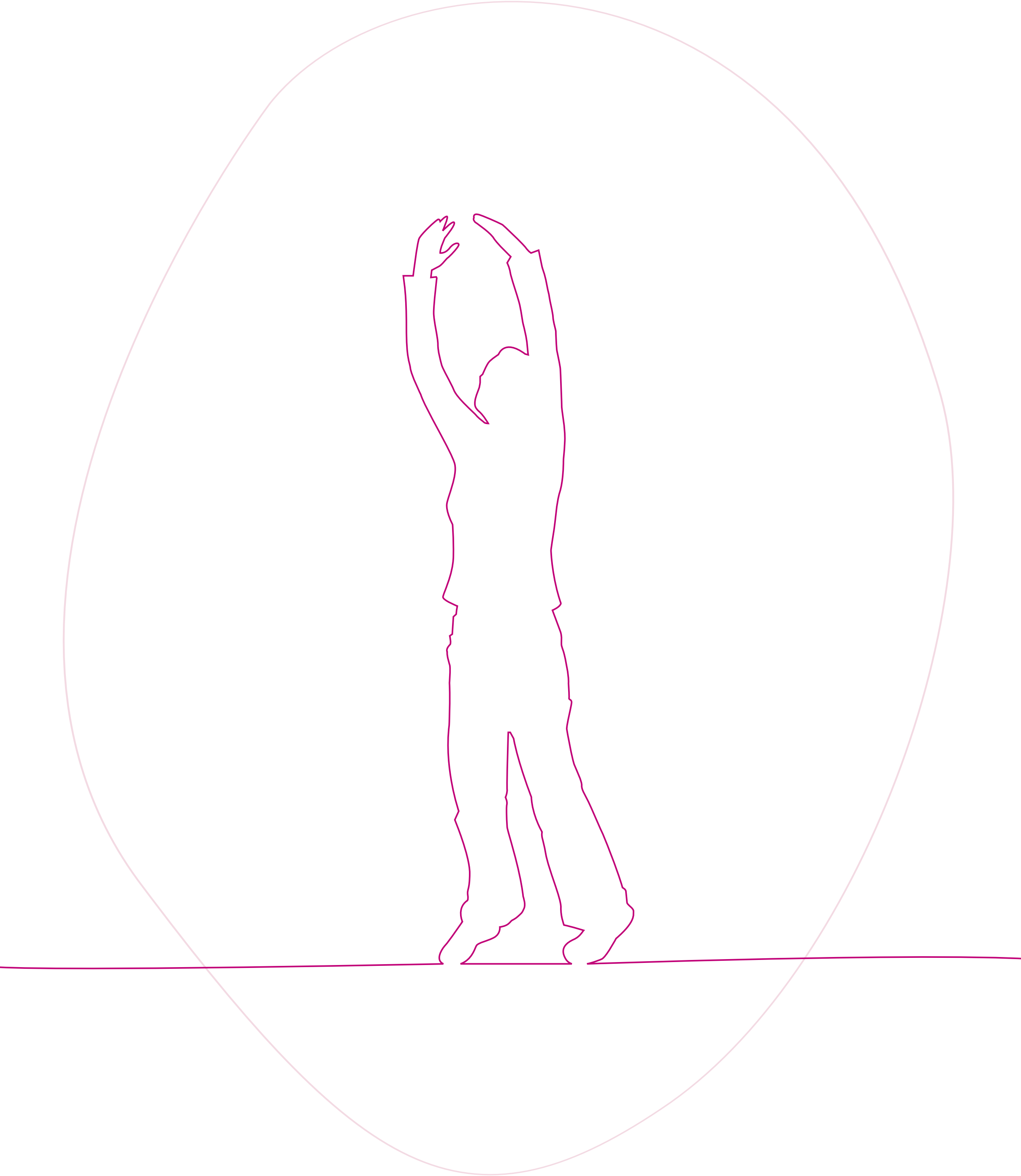
Use sequence, consistency, guidance and balance to build a structure that guides your reader though the text.

Clarity

Find the essence of your story, make it self-evident, describe it simply and economically, structure it logically and make the whole thing flow.

Humility

Be humble while writing and editing. Critically judge your work, recognise dissenting views, avoid spin doctoring, be genuine.



THE FIRST PRINCIPLE

Focus

Focus, the foundation of a good text, guides you through the planning and execution phases of your writing. Focus comes from using a brief and outline to determine what and how you are going to write.

Remember the tortuous presentation that left the audience in a deep coma? And the article that failed to move you in the first three paragraphs? Or the 120-page business plan that never led to funding? These products of wasted human toil (and organisational resources) probably lacked one of the crucial ingredients of good business writing: focus.

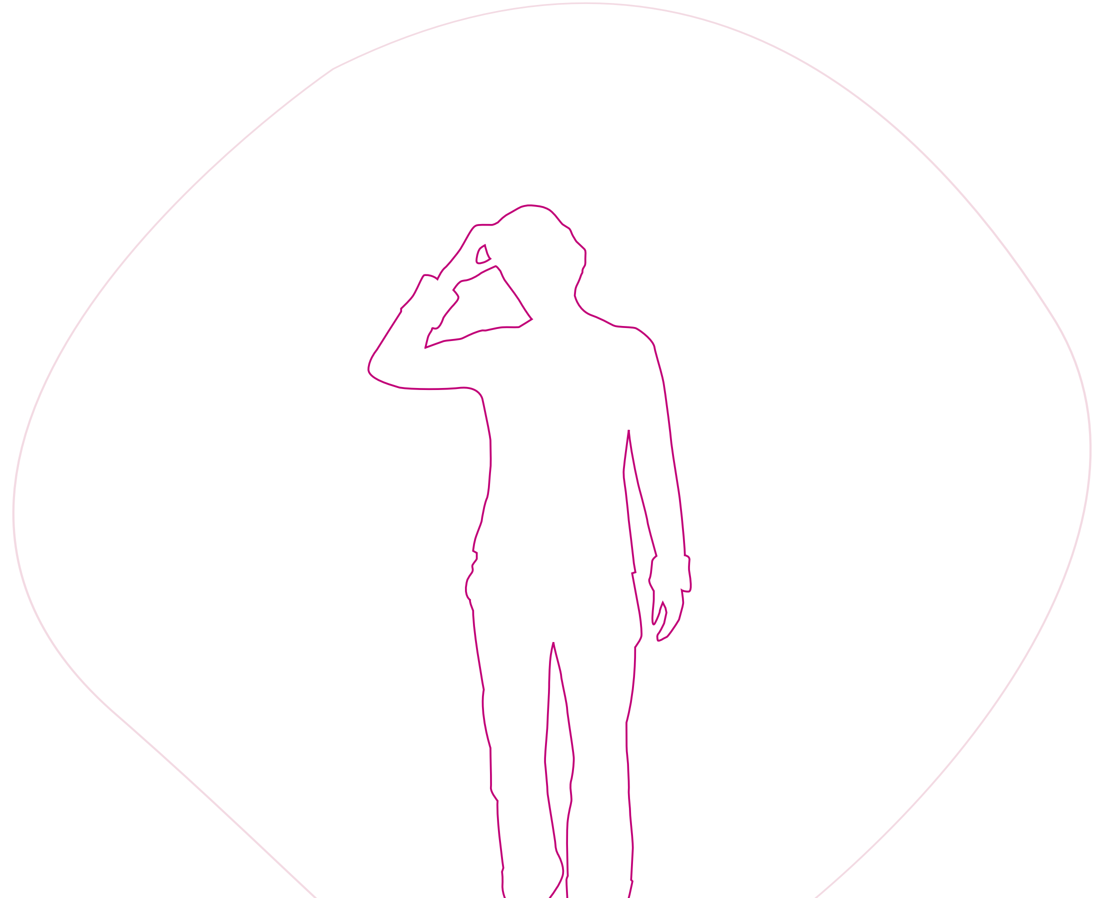
Focus involves adjusting the scope and scale of your writing in such a way that you are able to influence the attitude and behaviour of your readers.

- Scope refers to the breadth and depth of a story. Breadth means whether you restrict yourself to the subject matter, or include related issues. Depth refers to the level of detail you chose when developing a story.

- Scale simply means the length of a story. A news flash on the intranet or an e-mail to a colleague are examples of small-scale writing. Annual reports or business plans are examples of large-scale writing. The larger the scale, the more important it is to plan your writing.

- Attitude refers to your readers' emotional state and intellectual position. The emotional state can involve your readers' values, beliefs, feelings, ambitions, concerns etc. An intellectual position involves comprehension and reasoning, for example when discussing the merits of a new strategy or business case. In short, attitude involves the heart and mind of your reader, both of which need to be captured before your writing can be truly effective.

- Behaviour relates to action – or lack of it – on the part of the reader. If a story fails to justify a change programme, a reader may become fearful and obstruct the process. Or, announcing that an organisation supports an environmental non-governmental organisation may prompt consumers to purchase more of the company's products.

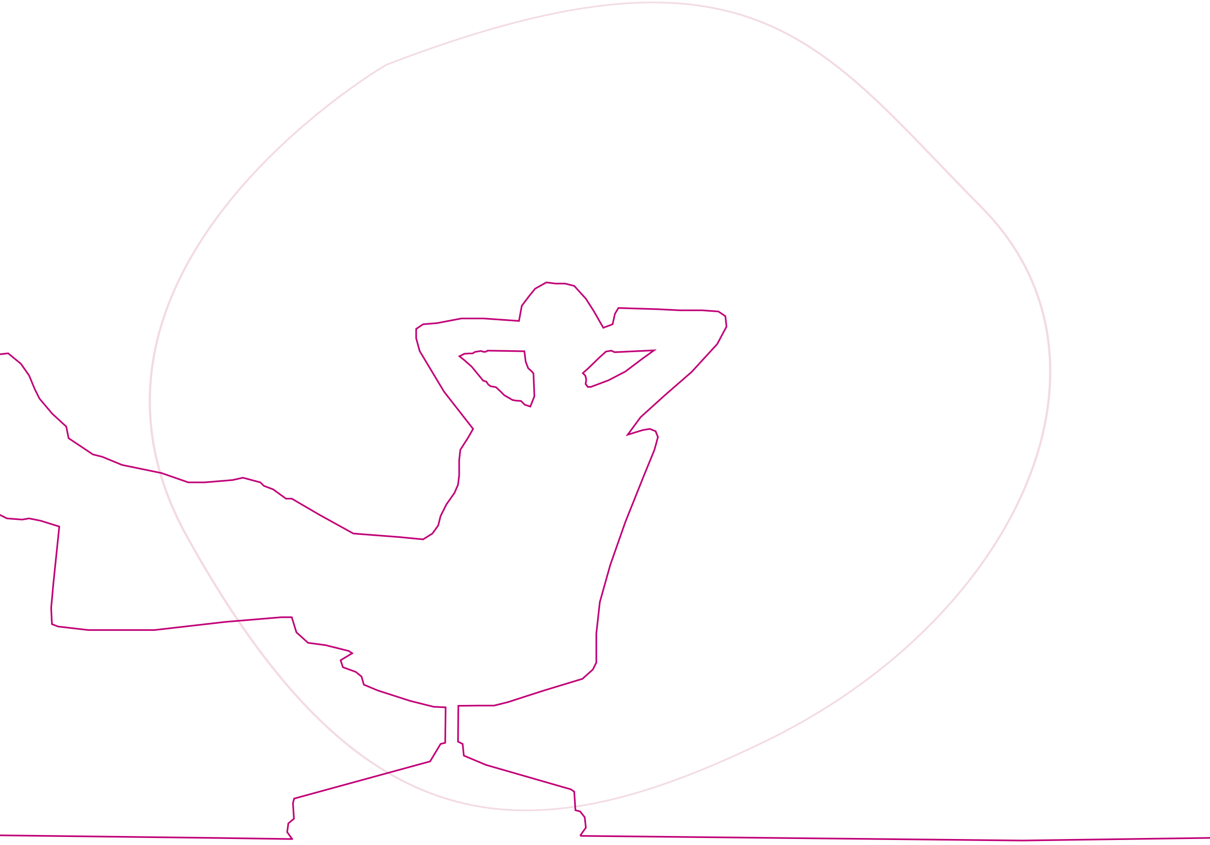


So how do you achieve focus?

When starting work on a writing assignment it is wise to write yourself a brief. Imagine that you are briefing an external agency who will do the writing for you and think of all the relevant information it needs to produce the outcome you desire. This probably means you will want to ask questions about the context, content, stakeholders and goals of the writing, such as:

- What is the external and internal business context, both strategic and operational?
- What is the main issue and what are the other related issues?
- Why is this issue important to each of the stakeholders for whom you are writing?
- Which stakeholders are you targeting and what are their values, beliefs, interests, needs, and ambitions?
- What are the attitudes and behaviours of your stakeholders regarding the subject and how do you wish to change each of them?
- What content and approach is needed to achieve this result?
- What is the occasion for which you are writing and how does this affect the scope and scale of your story?

Keep your answers short in order to get to the essence of what, how and why you wish to write. The goal is not to be eloquent but to focus your resources on the issues that really matter. It is also important that you take time to reflect on the brief and, when appropriate, consult others in the organisation. This could result in a healthy dialogue that allows participants to externalise their thoughts, assumptions, and interests. If you are able to assimilate these perspectives into a better whole, the end result will enjoy broad support. You can read more about this approach in the final chapter of this book, which suggests ways to manage the writing process.



Examples of briefs

Consider the following brief for an article that needs to be written for the in-house magazine of a publicly traded company. The article describes the approach to and result of a recent restructuring at a business unit and aims to show staff that the unit is now performing better.

Background

> *Two years ago, most analysts downgraded our stock because of concerns over cost and the product pipeline in the Widgets business unit. The Board and Widget leaders were given six months to prepare a restructuring plan; trade unions were involved from day one. A plan was signed off after seven months, its implementation took another 14; the annual results published in the meantime did not affect the chosen direction. The plan called for laying off 1,200 staff (57% through forced redundancies), heavier investments in R&D and a new HR strategy aimed at creating a culture of high performance. Currently, Widgets is producing on target with a more acceptable cost structure.*

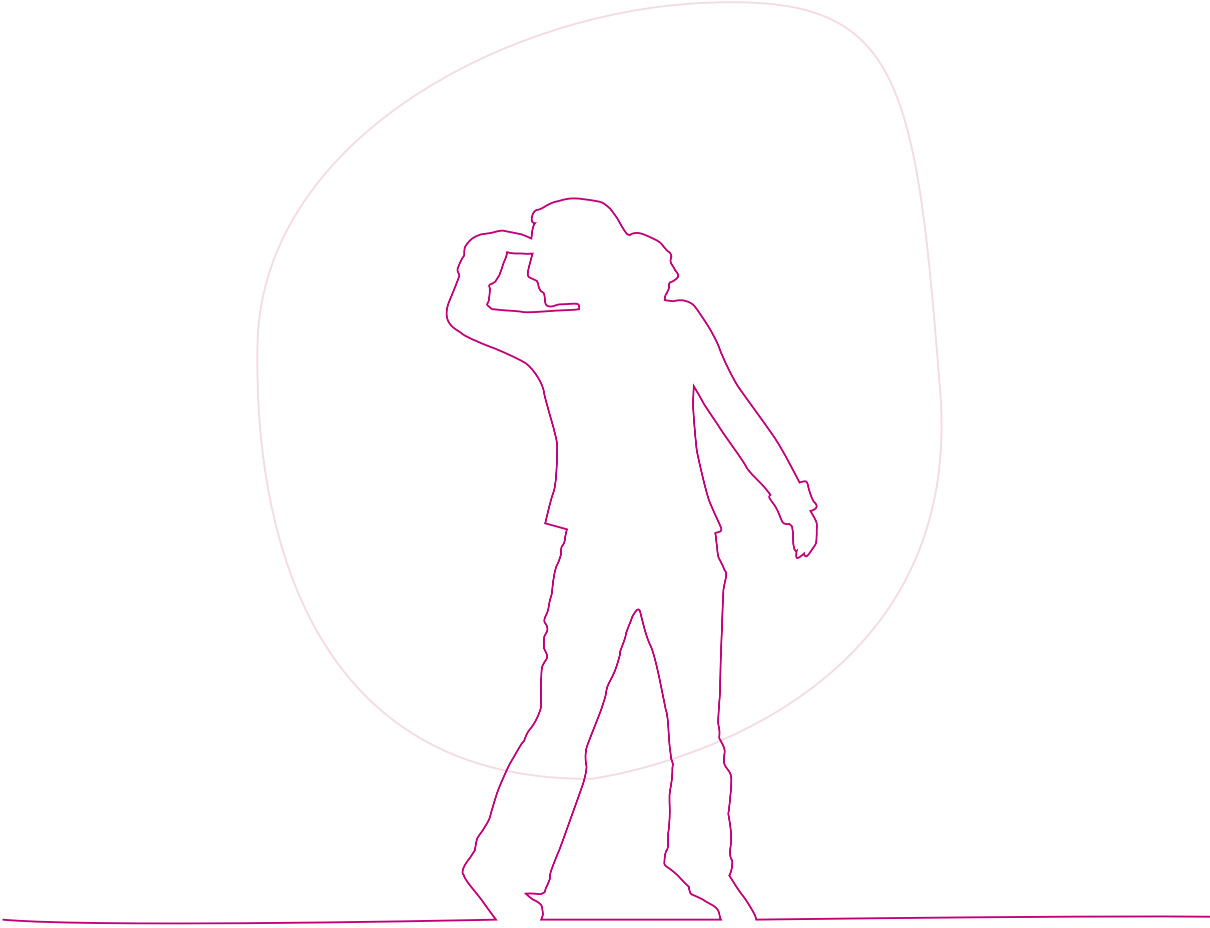
Goals and deliverables

> *The primary goal of this article is to positively influence the attitude of our (senior) staff, who feel the need to be reassured that the company is still able to turn itself around. A secondary goal is to publicly praise the Widgets business unit team for its hard work. Ideally, the article will include a short overview of the business case underlying the plan, financials, and an overview of our product pipeline. The article should not exceed 1,200 words and include quotes from a board member and a business unit leader.*

Resources and strategies

> *Interview a board member and business unit leader in order to get quotes, ask Finance for relevant data, and check with R&D what their pipeline looks like now. The tone should be realistic (acknowledging that the unit was underperforming two years ago) and confident (stressing the unit is now in a good shape).*

The brief is rudimentary but covers all bases. You could add more background information on the situation in other business units, and a overview of where the industry is heading. Whatever you do, it is probably wise to involve leaders from the change process in developing the outline and commenting on draft versions of the text.



Another example of a brief deals with a fictitious speech for a Minister of Foreign Affairs, who needs to address a conference about the future of the UN. The issue is contentious and highly politicised, with this official's country one of the few in favour of an overhaul of the UN. Based on the questions above, the brief could look something like this:

Background

The speech is held six months after the last roundtable of Ministers from UN nations. That conference yielded no specific decisions and was publicly branded a disaster. In the meantime, UN Security Council members have reiterated their opposition to an overhaul of the UN, fearing it would result in a permanent seat on the Council for emerging economies.

Goals and deliverables

The government wants to use this 15-minute speech (approximately 1,350 words) to galvanize negotiations. The speech should outline our position, acknowledge concerns of other member states and propose a solution that bridges both. The tone of the speech should be diplomatic yet self-assured: the language should communicate we are no longer willing to entertain new options but that we wish to quickly move forward.

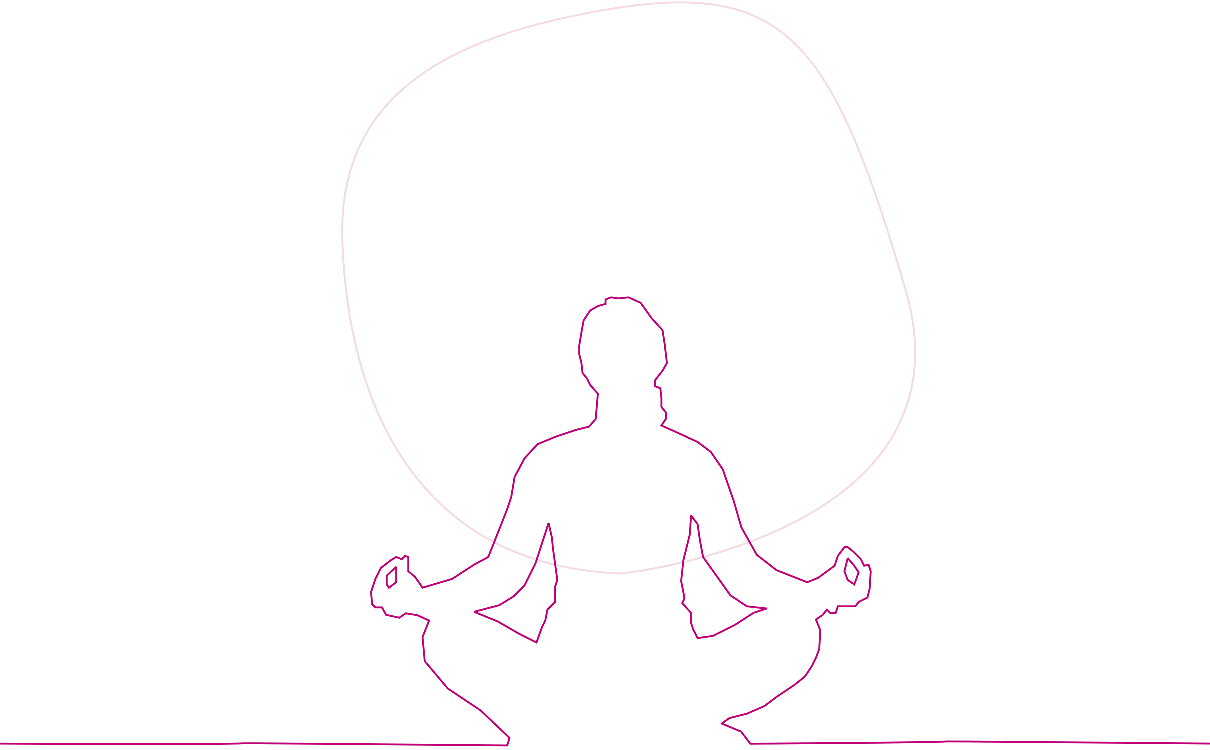
Strategy and resources

Liaise with senior policy members for specific input on the government's position and use statistics from past reports from the archive section on the server. The concept and final version of speech should be cleared with the Prime Minister's advisors and possibly be discussed in next week's Cabinet meeting.

Again, in a real-life situation such a brief could be more elaborate and specific, but this is just to show how even a short brief can focus the writer's thinking and subsequent work. The brief helps the writer to sharpen his arguments and navigate the political quagmire of the conference.

The outline: foundation of success

Complex writing needs to be properly designed, just like houses need to designed before construction can commence. The outline – a bullet point list of what you are going to write about – is the blueprint that serves this purpose. Now, don't worry about the grammatical and aesthetical quality of such a list, instead pay attention to whether the sequence of the bullet points is natural. Play around with the bullet points until you



have the sequence that feels right to you or makes the most sense to your audience.

What does such an outline look like? In the case of the article for the in-house magazine about the recently finalised restructuring of the Widgets business unit, the outline could be as follows:

- *In response to the 2003 annual results, analysts downgraded stock from buy to hold. Analysts said Widget cost structure unacceptable compared to competitors. Product pipeline insufficiently filled, problematic after failed launch of new widget year earlier.*

- *The Board largely agreed with analysts' assessments and worked with Widget leaders to develop a restructuring plan. Company involved unions in all our countries to ensure smooth implementation later on.*

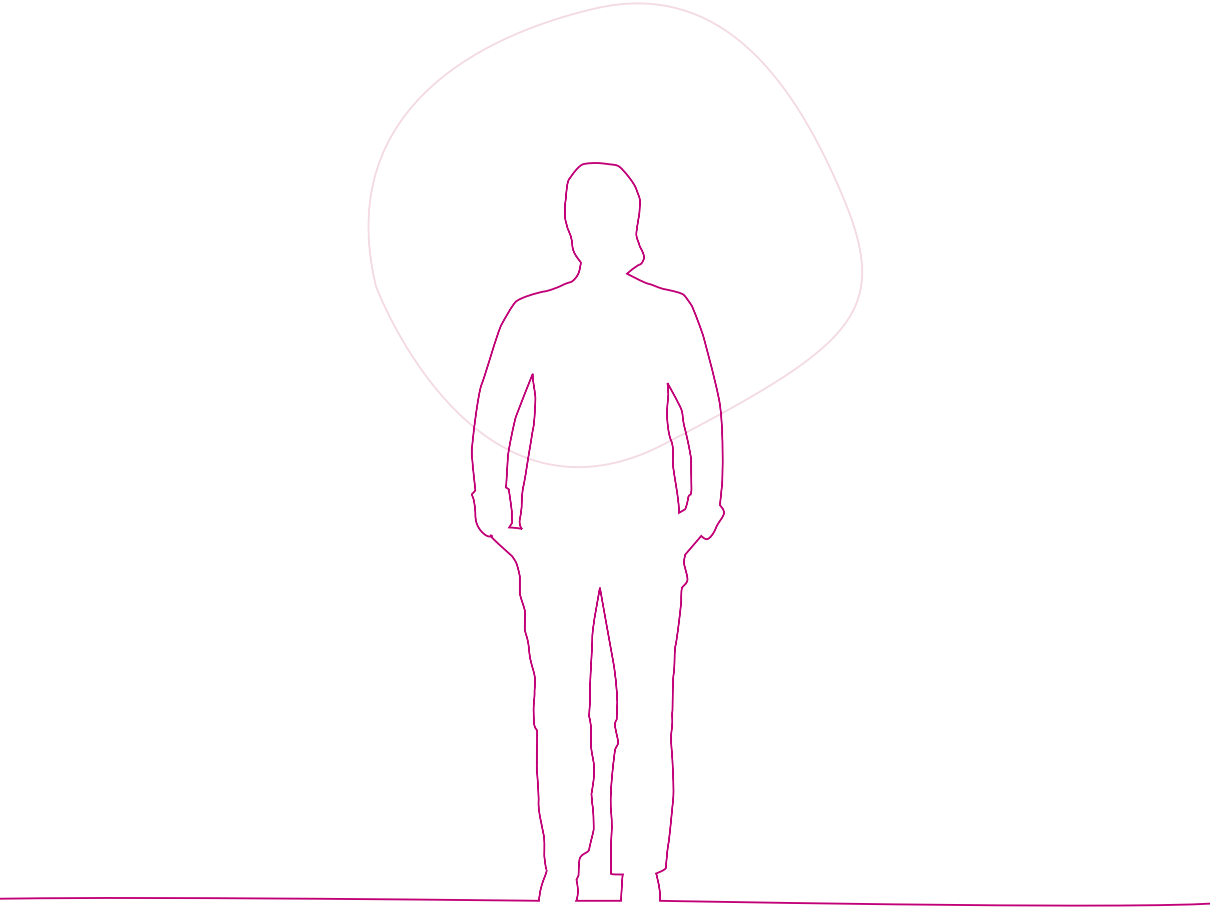
- *Plan focused on three areas: labour cost, corporate culture and R&D. These areas could yield quick results without undermining strategy.*

- *Labour cost: opted for laying off 1,200 staff, mainly administrative. Closed down smaller offices and worked with unions to enable early retirement. Main concern was maintaining R&D capacity and providing sufficient sales support in growth areas, in order to parry inroads by competitors.*

- *Corporate culture: after years of lacklustre growth, culture of complacency. Feeling of responsibility and teamwork weakened, more emphasis on quick individual gains. Focused on re-engineering the culture while also promoting entrepreneurship (link to R&D). Introduced new performance-based pay and competence management.*

- *R&D: acquired a small research company with Widget-related technology patents and hired 120 new engineers and scientists. Integrated labs for economies of scale and closed down two disappointing research projects. R&D staff bonuses tied to number of products in pipeline and speed at which they move through (HR link).*

- *Implementation began early 2004, communicated results of benchmark study and announced goals and reasons for restructuring. Dedicated implementation project team with Board support.*



- *Early results indicate cost structure now in line with industry norms and introduced 5 new projects into the pipeline. Our goal is to introduce one new project each quarter and bring one project to market each year.*

In the case of the fictitious speech for the Minister on an overhaul of the UN, a possible outline could be:

Introduction

- *Ceremonial welcome to guests, congratulate host on organisation and hospitality. Reference to previous conference: dialogue remains key, many challenges remain.*

- *Today's meeting at a time of political and economic turmoil: terrorism, recessions, increasing competition for fossil fuels.*

- *As a result of globalisation, our economies are intertwined: unilateral action futile, challenges require multilateral approach. This conference seeks way to achieve this.*

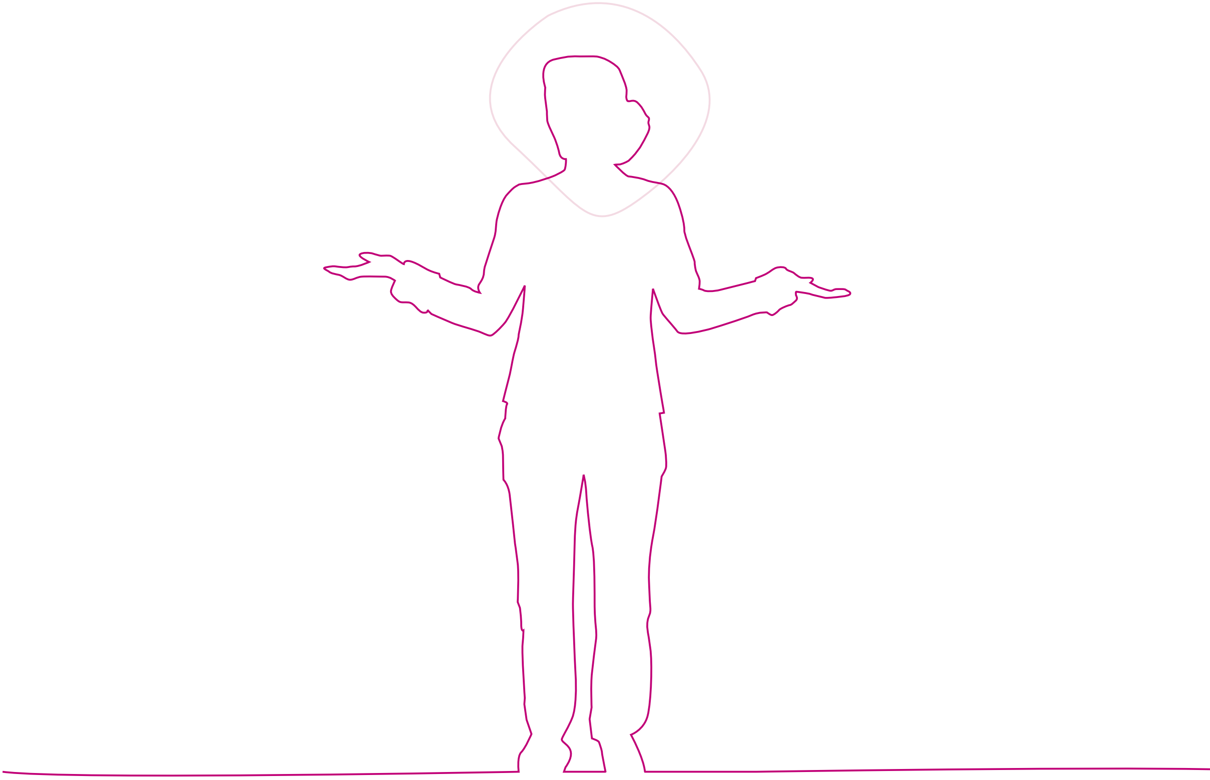
Revamping the UN

- *Is existing UN able to execute such multilateral approaches? Opinions admittedly divided, but my government believes it is not. Inability of UN to deal with Somalia, Balkans and Iraq. Also: UN inefficient and corrupt.*

- *Urgent need for reforms: modernise governance, increase scope of mandate, organisational and financial streamlining, broaden Security Council membership to reflect modern geopolitical status quo.*

- *At same time, UN dialogue and action needs to be aligned with other forums such as WTO. We need to reorganise the UN, but we could explore idea of synchronising events at WTO and UN.*

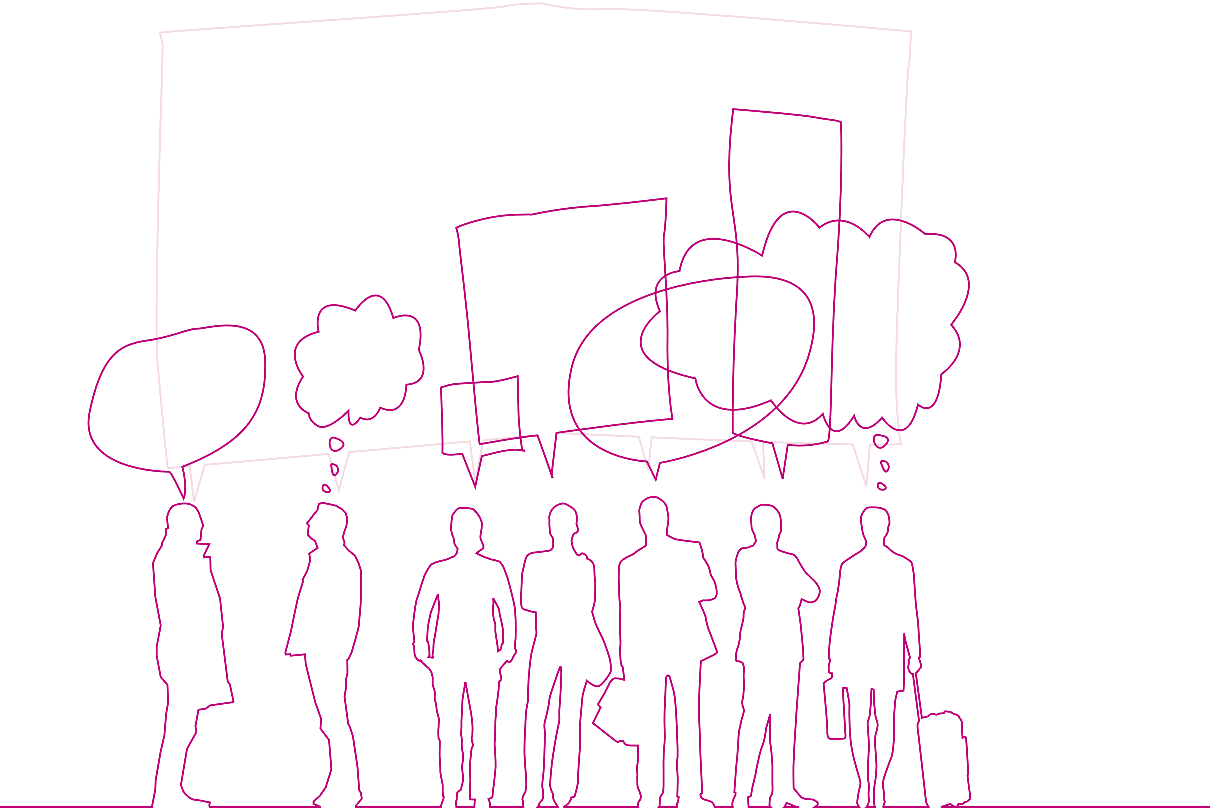
- *Cost of inaction larger than effort to achieve change. UN is vital, but only effective in a changed format*



Conclusion

Realise our views are radical, but we really feel the need to make a decision and move forward. This week's conference should yield preliminary results. My government offers to host next conference.

As both outlines show, the structure of the story is essentially in place. There is already a logic as to how the different parts connect and what items will be discussed where. The outline is not particularly compelling, but it does what it's supposed to do: focus your thinking and writing. To develop a good outline, you need to connect the dots and put some meat on the bones.



THE SECOND PRINCIPLE

Purpose

You can build on the foundation of focus by writing with your stakeholders' goals and interests in mind. But if you want to develop a truly effective story you need to appeal to your readers' sense of purpose as well. This way you create a text that is both intellectually sound and emotionally compelling.

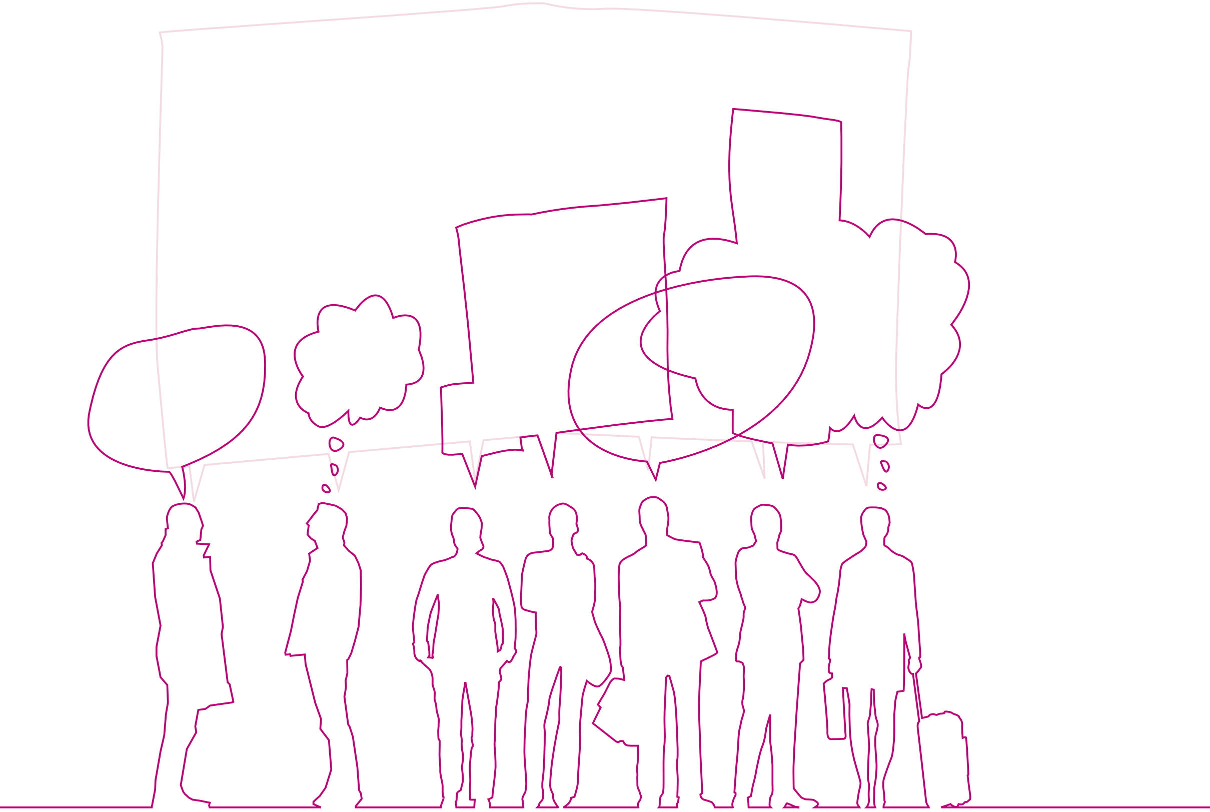
Most organisations appear to be dominated by logic, quantitative analysis and decisions based on financial targets, at least if you only look at their use of language. Like most other organisations, yours will discuss abstract things like 'synergy' and 'high performance' or talk about 'increasing shareholder value' and 'exceeding customer expectations'. This approach has its merits, particularly as a way to facilitate decision-making and get people to focus their thinking on important organisational issues.

And yet, this is a stale kind of language that most people find difficult to relate to (imagine what would happen if you asked your partner for more synergy or a cutting-edge night on the town). This is because a purely rational approach to business writing doesn't engage people on the level of their identity. As a result, traditional business writing fails to achieve full support for the organisation's mission, vision, strategy and day-to-day operations.

Your business writing will become more effective when you complement your organisation's logical approach with right-brain relational skills. Chiefly, this can be done by analysing business issues in terms of their purpose and explaining what this means to people's lives or the organisation. The principle of meaning is the subject of the next chapter, this chapter will tackle the principle of purpose in more detail.

Purpose in and of organisations

The notion of purpose may be an odd one within today's corporate environment, particularly when a word like 'goal' seems more familiar. While both words imply a desired outcome, they differ in a way that is significant for your ability to write well. Goals are formulated in response to changes in the competitive environment, are based on intellectual analyses, and are defined in quantitative or qualitative terms. Examples of goal-oriented statements are:



- *Next year, we need to increase profitability by 5% if we are to outperform our competitors.*

- *In order to expand our presence in the West we need to acquire local companies.*

- *This plan aims to attract venture capital to fund the development of a prototype.*

Purpose is derived from a person's or organisation's values and beliefs. It is defined in emotional and relational terms, and remains a constant even when the environment changes over time. Going against someone's sense of purpose creates conflict, while action in line with purpose creates harmony and gives people strength and courage. Purpose motivates people in a way that goals are unable to, something shown by the limited effect increased salary has on the performance of people.

Purpose is not a fringe concept but the bedrock upon which the organisation and its people rest. Successful companies - and people - are purpose-driven, meaning they have identified their purpose and aligned their goals, actions and relationships with it. Ideally, a company's strategy is aligned with its purpose, as are its cultures, processes and styles of communication. Companies with a strong sense of purpose tend to have shared values and beliefs.

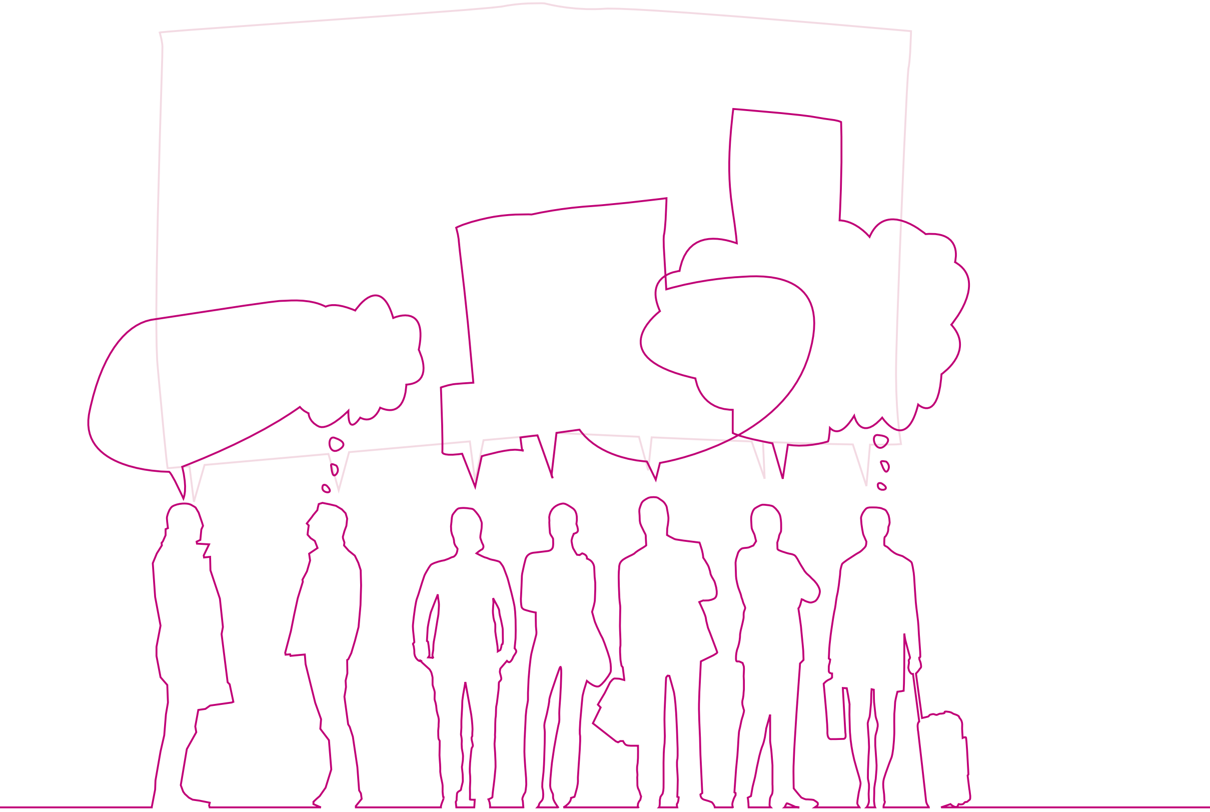
Unlike goal-oriented language, purposeful language engages people on the level of their identity. This means that even when discussing hard core business issues like shareholder value or the supply chain, you can relate to both people's cognitive and emotional sides. In other words, you communicate with people in a way that captures their hearts and minds. Examples of purposeful statements are:

- *Let's make things better. (Philips tagline)*

- *In my organisation, we believe it is important to help elderly people live independently as long as possible.*

- *Good corporate citizenship means balancing the needs of 'people, planet and profit'.*

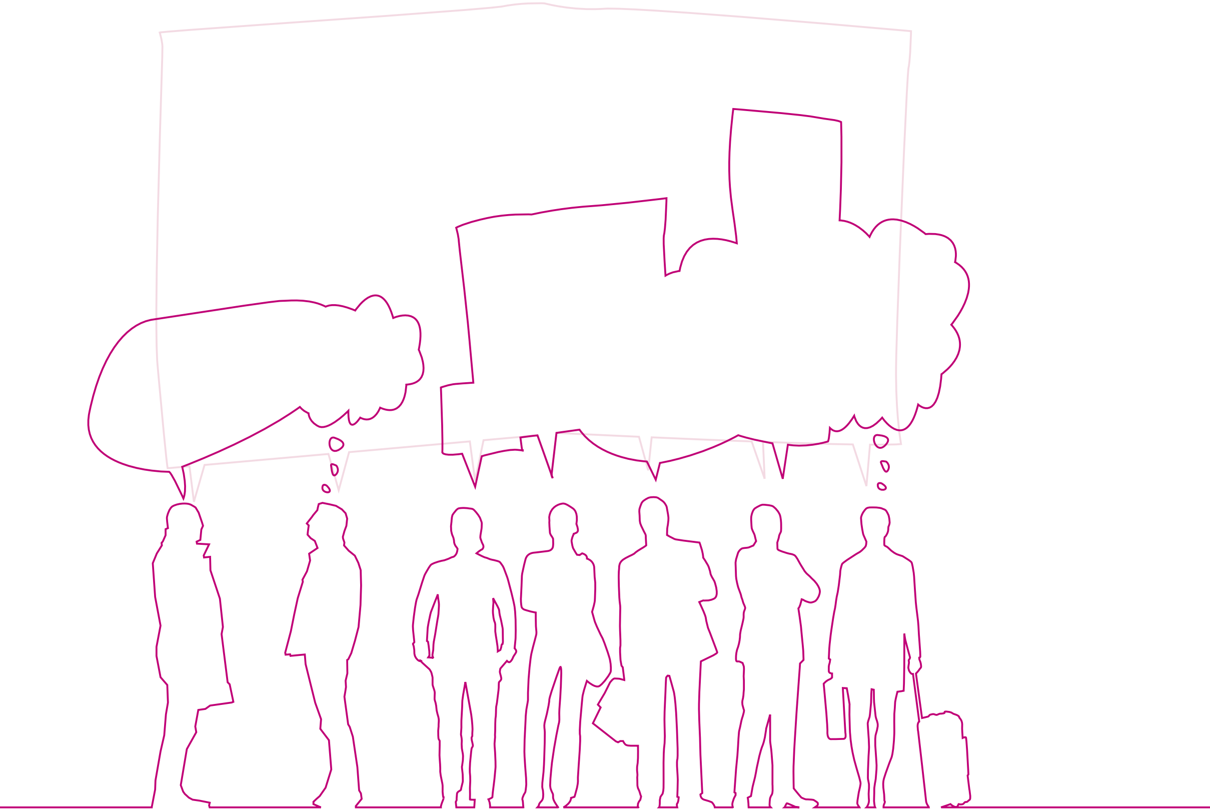
A beautiful example of purposeful language is Johnson & Johnson's Credo. This text, written in 1943 and updated annually with the participation of all staff, has significant



impact on the company's vision and business decisions. More than a simple mission statement, the Credo balances purpose and goals in a language that is both businesslike and humanly engaging. The text reads:

> *'We believe our first responsibility is to the doctors, nurses and patients, to mothers and fathers and all others who use our products and services. In meeting their needs everything we do must be of high quality. We must constantly strive to reduce our costs in order to maintain reasonable prices. Customers' orders must be serviced promptly and accurately. Our suppliers and distributors must have an opportunity to make a fair profit.*
>
> *We are responsible to our employees, the men and women who work with us throughout the world. Everyone must be considered as an individual. We must respect their dignity and recognize their merit. They must have a sense of security in their jobs. Compensation must be fair and adequate, and working conditions clean, orderly and safe. We must be mindful of ways to help our employees fulfil their family responsibilities. Employees must feel free to make suggestions and complaints. There must be equal opportunity for employment, development and advancement for those qualified. We must provide competent management, and their actions must be just and ethical.*
>
> *We are responsible to the communities in which we live and work and to the world community as well. We must be good citizens - support good works and charities and bear our fair share of taxes. We must encourage civic improvements and better health and education. We must maintain in good order the property we are privileged to use, protecting the environment and natural resources.*
>
> *Our final responsibility is to our stockholders. Business must make a sound profit. We must experiment with new ideas. Research must be carried on, innovative programs developed and mistakes paid for. New equipment must be purchased, new facilities provided and new products launched. Reserves must be created to provide for adverse times. When we operate according to these principles, the stockholders should realize a fair return.'*

If you compare this text to a more traditional statement like 'our mission is to exceed customer expectations' or 'our mission is to be an industry leader', which of these texts do you think will have more impact on the behaviour and attitude of your stakeholders? Which will have more impact on the bottom line?



Using purpose in business writing

If you accept the value of organisational purpose and the language that supports it, you may wonder how to use it in your own writing. The answer is that you can use purpose in three ways: to develop a more pertinent analysis of what you are writing about, to explain what you are writing about in a more compelling context and to use a certain type of language while avoiding another.

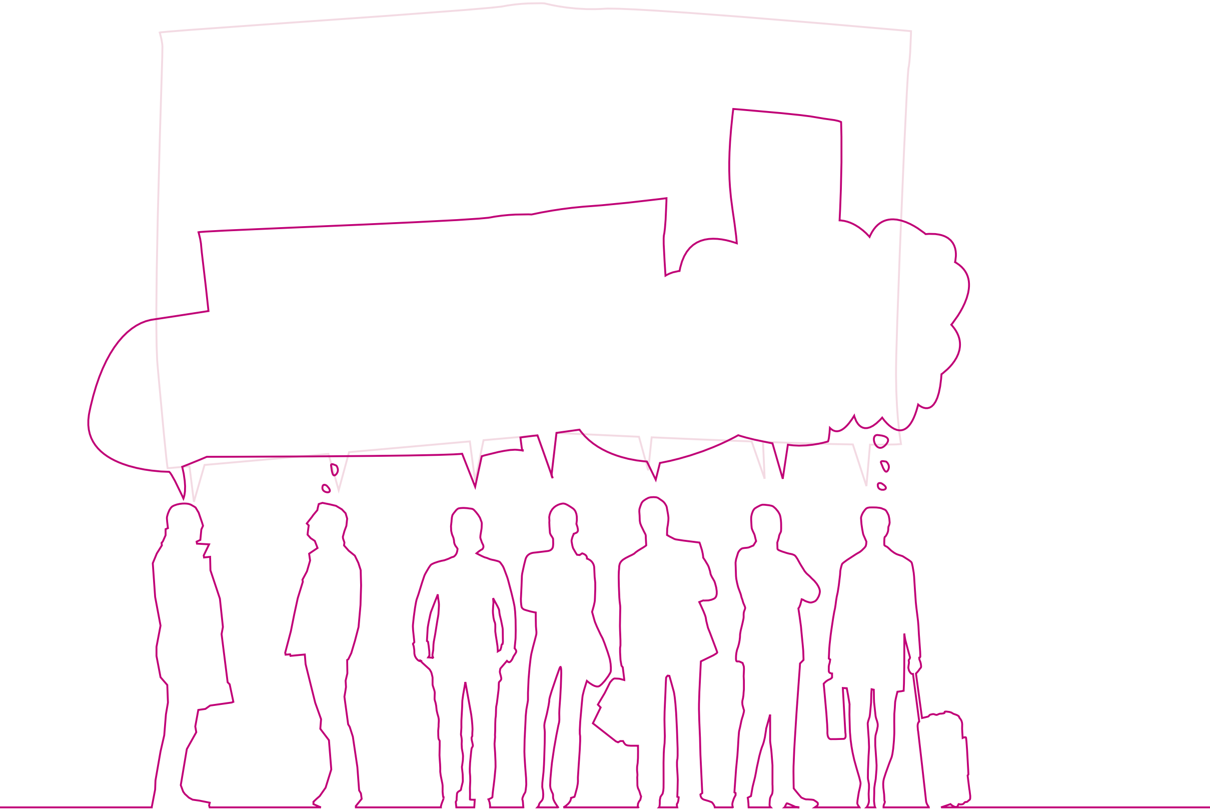
Purpose analysis

As for the first use of purpose, your writing can be based on what can be called a 'purpose analysis'. While this was touched upon in the chapter on focus - think of the questions you asked when developing a brief - you can take this a little deeper and conduct a more thorough analysis. In its simplest form, the analysis requires you to do three things:

- *Identify your (individual, organisational) values, beliefs, needs and ambitions*
- *Identify the values, beliefs, needs and ambitions of your readers*
- *Find the areas where the two overlap, emphasise the commonalities and address the discrepancies, taking into consideration your own goals and interests and those of the other party*

This exercise doesn't need to be terribly complicated, and it certainly doesn't require a dozen MBAs and a six-month global research programme. The idea is to put yourself in the shoes of your audience and imagine how your readers think, make decisions, what they feel and value, how the past is going to influence them, what it is they are seeking to achieve, what they fear etc. If this is all too complicated or time-consuming, ask yourself at least one simple question: how would I react, if I were in their position and read the text I have written?

Once you understand, no matter how vaguely, what matters to your readers, you need to decide what that means to you. What are you going to say about your topic, now that you know how your audience perceives the subject and its consequences? How will you explain things in terms of their values, beliefs, their fears and ambitions? How will you express what matters to you? What examples, references or quotes are you going to use? What kind of language will appeal to them, what style supports your goal?



You are responsible for talking to your audience in the right way and for pushing the right buttons. You shouldn't only analyse the issue in terms of goals and political interests, but also address it from the perspective of purpose. By doing so, you can create an environment where people want to listen to what you have to say.

Purpose as your context

The power of purpose also lies in its ability to guide your creativity, reflection and decision-making during the writing process. In other words: by regularly referring to the purpose analysis and using that as the framework within which to develop your story, you can match your style, substance and structure accordingly.

This may sound simple, but in practice it is easy to forget about the map when you are midway through your journey. The writing process takes time, the circumstances tend to change and others who get involved have ideas of their own. In other words: it is easy to get distracted and lose sight of the big picture, and instead focus on goals and left-brain language rather than adding the extra layer of meaning that is derived from purpose.

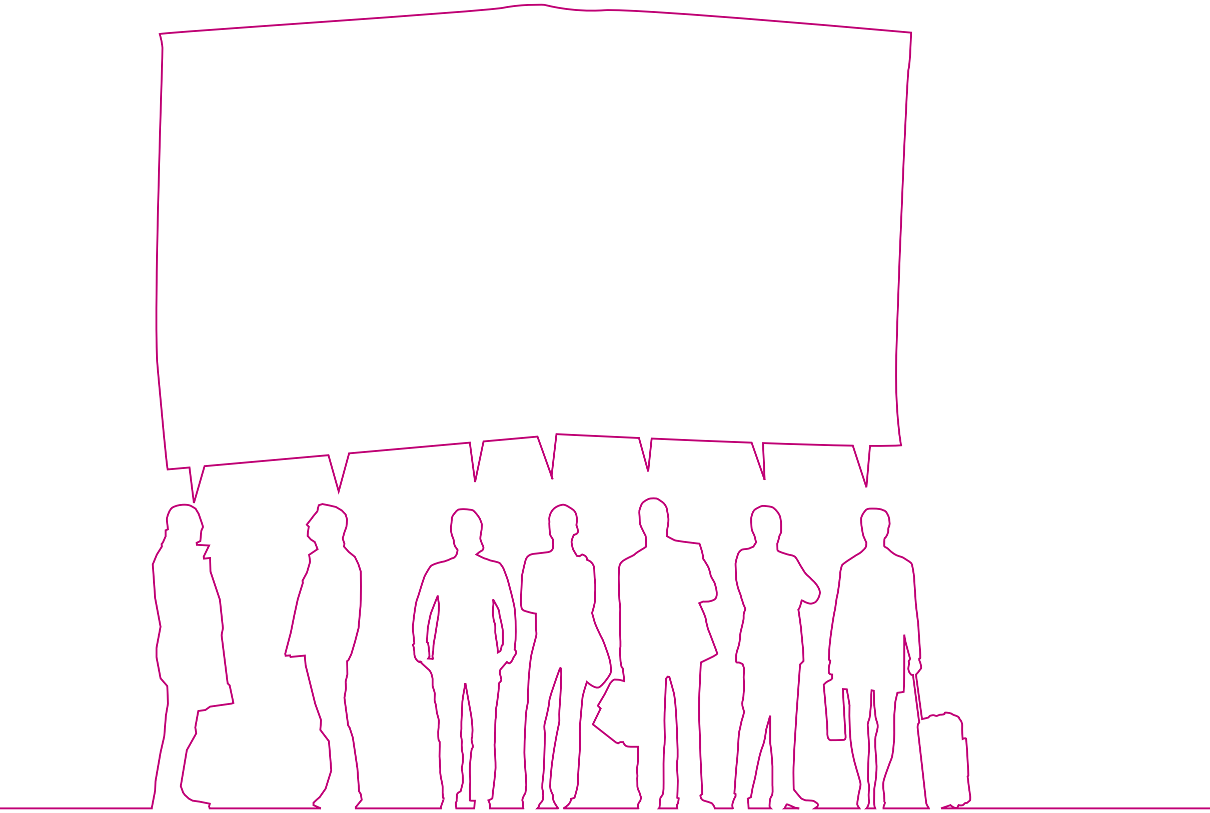
Language to avoid, language to embrace

Earlier in this chapter, the difference between purpose and goal was established, as well as what this means for purposeful and goal-oriented language. Good business language, that is language that effectively changes your readers' attitude and behaviour, balances both. From a linguistic point of view, good business writing requires you to avoid certain types of language and embrace other types instead.

Language to avoid

- *Buzzwords, typical management speak. People rarely have the same interpretation of complex words, and some words have become so trite they will immediately disqualify your writing. Be careful when using words like 'synergy', 'value-added', 'paradigm', 'cutting-edge', 'leverage', 'interface', 'centre of excellence'. More on this in the chapter on clarity.*

- *Language that is too conceptual, particularly when writing about people (issues). Don't use 'headcount' when you mean 'the men and women working for this company'. Again, more on this in the chapter on clarity.*



Language to embrace

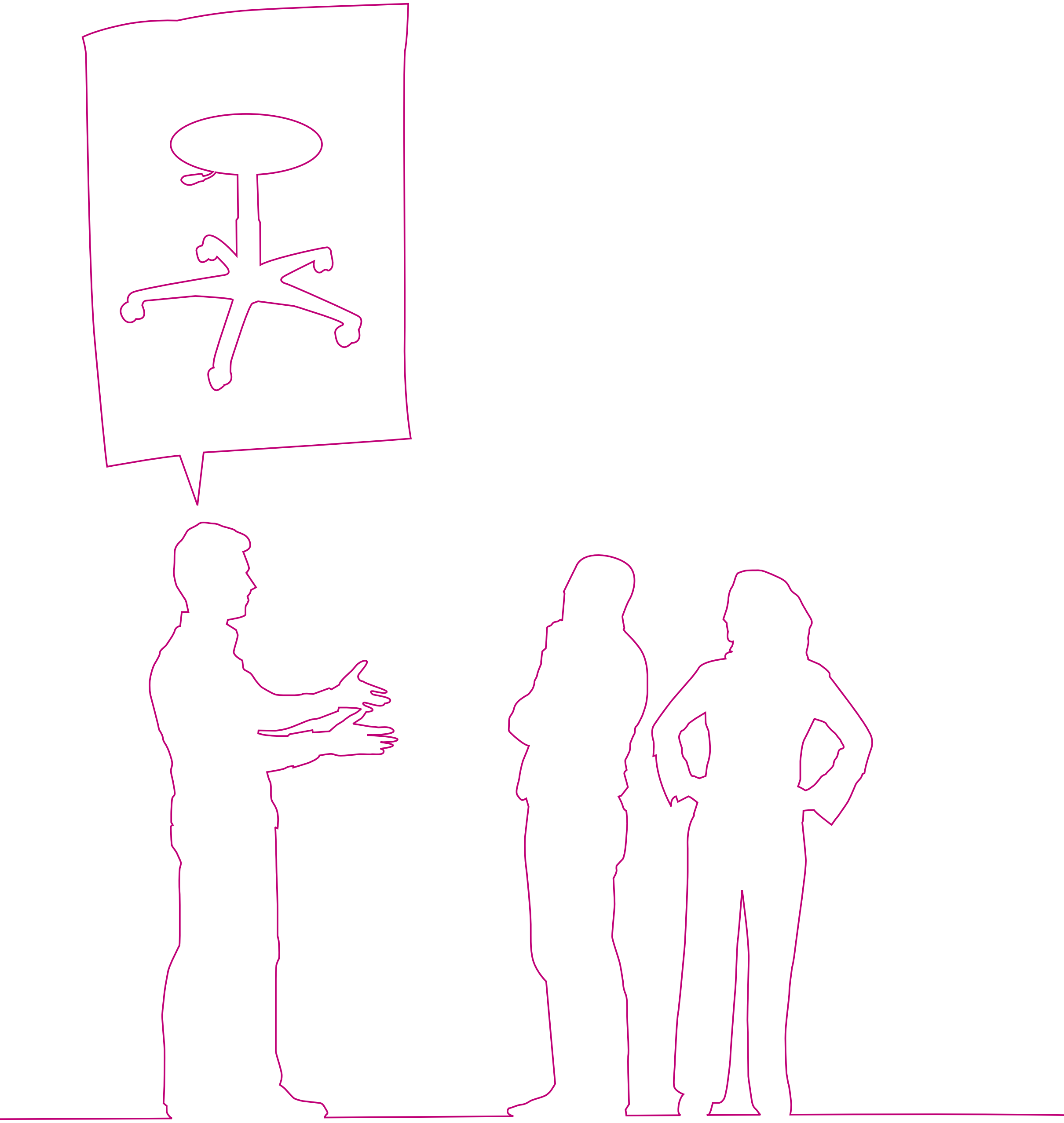
- *Sensory language, in particular*
  - *kinaesthetic (relating to sense of touch: I feel that, grasp the idea)*
  - *auditory (relating to sense of hearing: I hear what you are saying, it sounds good to me)*
  - *visual (relating to sense of vision: it appears that, in view of, big-picture thinking)*

People find it easier to relate to sensory language than to the analytical and conceptual language commonly used by businesses. NLP, or Neuro-Linguistic Programming, has done wonderful work in uncovering how people use these types of language to strengthen their cognitive and relational skills.

- *The people equation. Ultimately, everything starts and ends with people in your organisation, even abstract things like 'ROI' and 'ERP'. Thinking and writing in a strictly conceptual sense (e.g. dealing with projects, processes, deliverables, strategies) will be ignored.*

- *Relationships. These show how what you are doing relates to people's lives, the organisation's goals, or market trends. Make comparisons, show commonalities, identify how things are connected. Relationships are like beams on which you build a roof: they strengthen the structure of what you are creating.*

If there is only one thing you remember after reading this book, it should be that the best kinds of business writing address human purpose. Find out what drives your audience, what they fear or what gets them excited. Then explain whatever business you have to discuss in those terms, in a way that is business-like but personal and warm at the same time. In the next chapter, dealing with meaning, you will learn how to take this approach one step further.



THE THIRD PRINCIPLE

Meaning

Writers can significantly increase their rapport with readers if they move from describing what something 'is' to explaining what something 'means'. This is a vital but often forgotten step in the writing process.

Your task as a writer is to make sense of what is happening in the organisation in a way that people can relate to and act upon. To help you tackle this challenge, previous chapters of this book advised you to write a brief and outline, and to develop a writing strategy based on organisational goals and purpose. In this chapter, you will learn how focusing on meaning will further improve your writing.

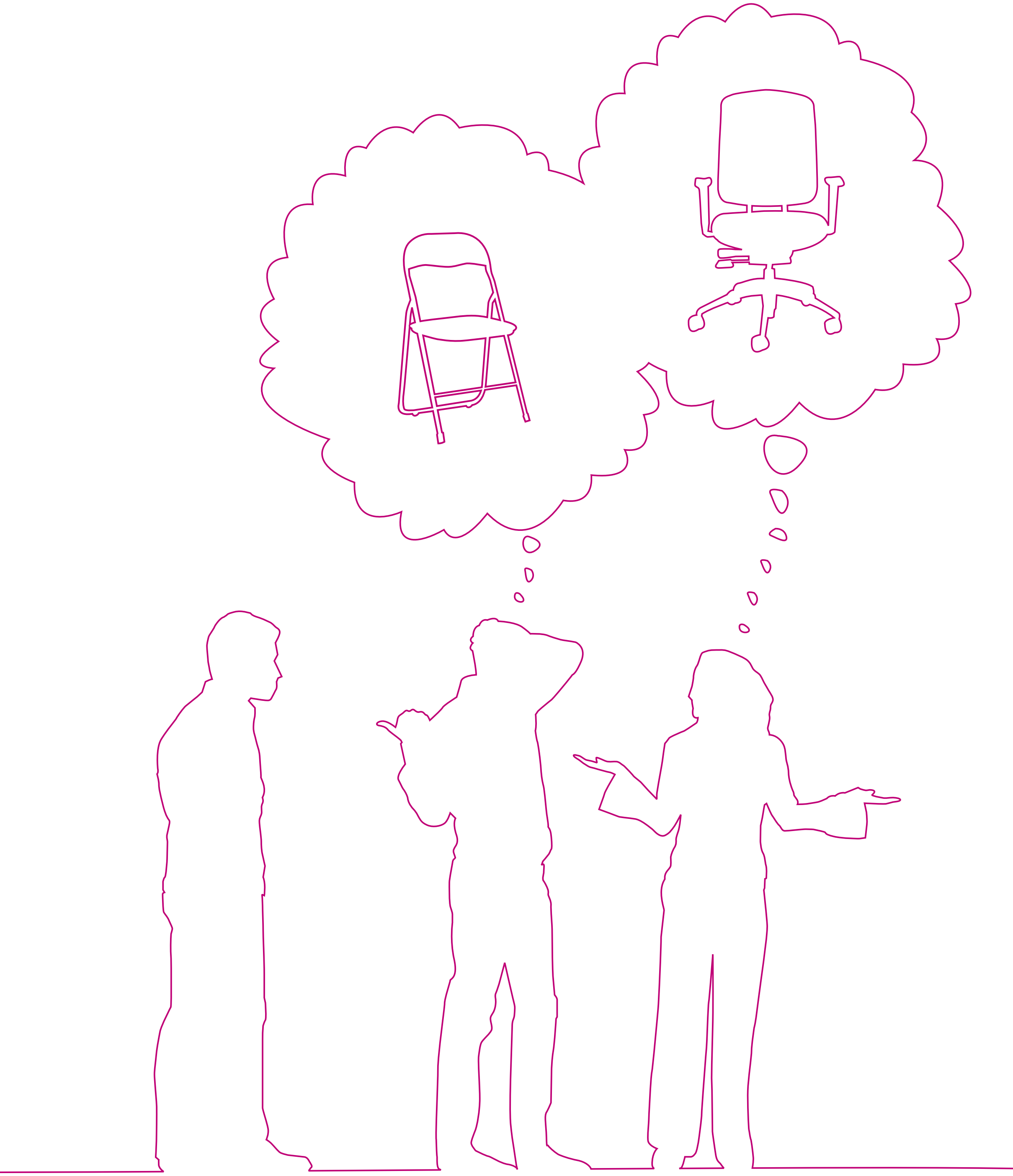
How does the concept of meaning relate to the organisation? Meaning is the translation of goals and purpose into something to which a reader can relate. Translation in this case can mean two things: it can either be the clarification of a word or phrase, or it can refer to the effect that something has on the organisation as a whole. Let's look at both aspects in more detail.

Clarify yourself

At first sight, people in the organisation appear to be communicating with ease, using everyday words whose meaning is assumed to be understood. But delve deeper and it becomes clear that organisational language is really quite ambiguous. The widespread use of business jargon – words like synergy, leading, key, and competitive field – has created a pseudo-language that people believe conveys real meaning. Employees assume they know what such words mean to others, but in reality they don't.

Take for example a word like *'performance'*, something senior management and the HR department love to increase in the organisation. But what exactly is performance? What criteria are used and who says they are right for the organisation? Performance during what period of time? Compared to what or whom? Merely talking about 'increasing performance' and arguing people and processes need to change isn't necessarily in the best interests of the organisation.

This is not an attack on jargon per se. As long as all organisational members interpret jargon in the same way, its use can strengthen the organisation's culture and speed up



communication. Unfortunately, business jargon tends to be so vague that people have vastly differing interpretations of the same words or phrases. Because of this, jargon does major damage to a corporation's ability to convey meaning to its members. If this causes staff to feel alienated, there can be a breakdown in communication.

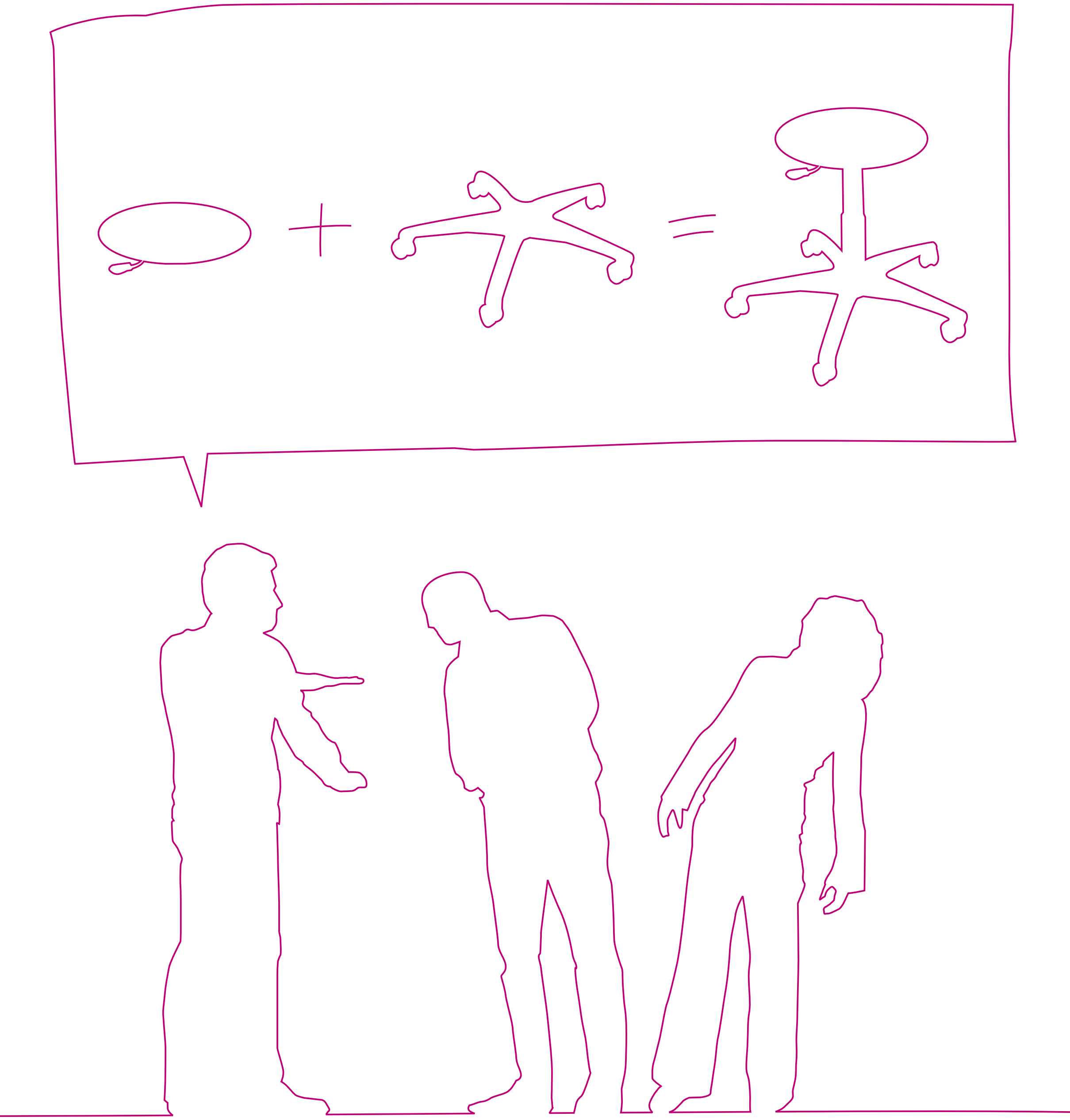
What should you as a writer do to communicate clearly? First of all, be aware of the fact that the process of interpretation is terribly complex. People interpret words in a variety of contexts, such as upbringing, society and the organisation's culture. Communication with stakeholders, particularly those with widely differing interests, needs and emotional states, makes your job as a writer all the more challenging. It is your responsibility to critically evaluate what you write and how that can be interpreted.
In particular, you should constantly ask - and answer - a very simple question: what does this mean? Ask this of every word, every sentence, every paragraph and every chapter, until it becomes second nature. This question helps you to step outside your own frame of reference and critically evaluate the words, structure or style used. If such a simple technique were used consistently, business jargon would be used less frivolously.

Another way to aid the process of interpretation is to take the reader by the hand with constructions like 'which means that' or 'as a result of which'. It also helps to start a sentence with constructions like 'This leads to', 'That contributes to' or 'As a result of this'. These constructions create bridges between a previous sentence and an explanation or elaboration and helps the reader - and sometimes yourself - make sense of what is being communicated.

The meaning of goals and purpose in organisations

You just read how the principle of meaning can help you to be more precise in your use of language. This principle can also be applied to the organisation as a whole, specifically when you want to explain how something will affect the organisation.
For example, the introduction of a performance-based pay system will change the way people are motivated and how they relate to each other. Outlining the strategic rationale for such a change – say, dealing with increased competition – targets stakeholders at an intellectual level and helps people see the logic of change. This helps people understand the underlying business case and how it impacts their own plans and targets.

But winning the hearts of people, which is needed to get them to change their attitude and behaviour, requires you to address the meaning of such change in terms of



their values, beliefs and ambitions. Rather than just dealing with the needs and interests of stakeholders you should relate to your readers' identity as well. This requires you to connect change and its desired outcome to meaning.

Now, meaning on an organisational level can be clarified by asking simple questions like

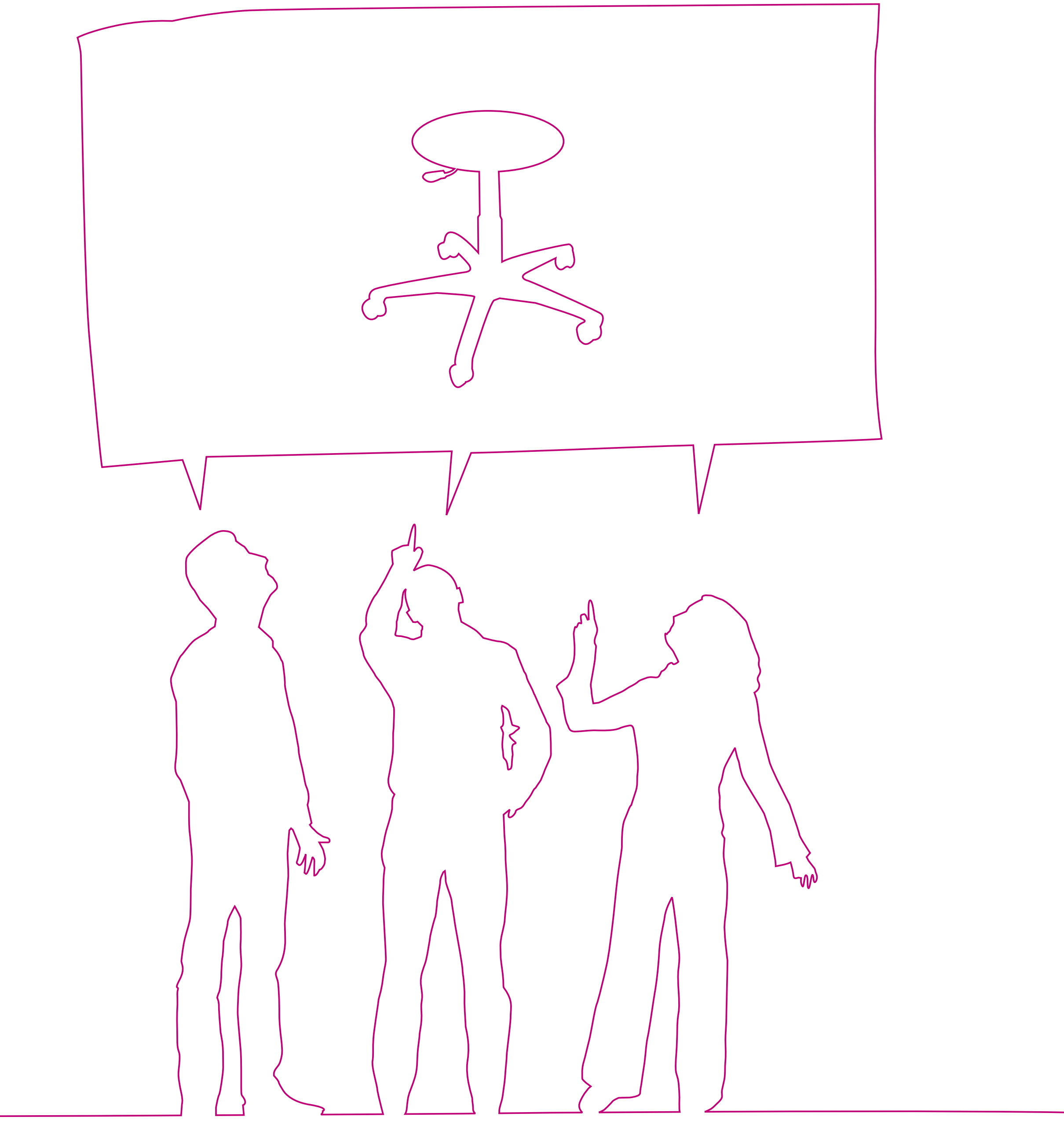
- *What does this mean to the organisation?*
- *How does this affect our stakeholders and the way they do things on a day-to-day basis?*
- *How will this change our ability to achieve our goals?*
- *How will this change our ability to relate to others inside and outside of the organisation?*
- *How will this change our culture?*
- *What will this do to our market position?*

As a rule of thumb, the more significant the organisational change, the more the change means to people. Identifying and addressing this gap in communicating with people is crucial to the success of the change process. Answering the question 'what does X mean to Y' for each of your stakeholders is a simple yet effective way of connecting with your readers. If you are looking for a simple way to put this into writing, use the *'[Statement], meaning [consequence]'* format. For example:

- *We are facing more competition, meaning we need to develop new products.*
- *We have incurred higher costs, meaning we will have to lay off staff.*
- *This team has met all its targets, meaning team members have earned a bonus.*

Instead of using only this construction throughout the text, you can use the following alternatives:

- *as a result of which*
- *which translates into*



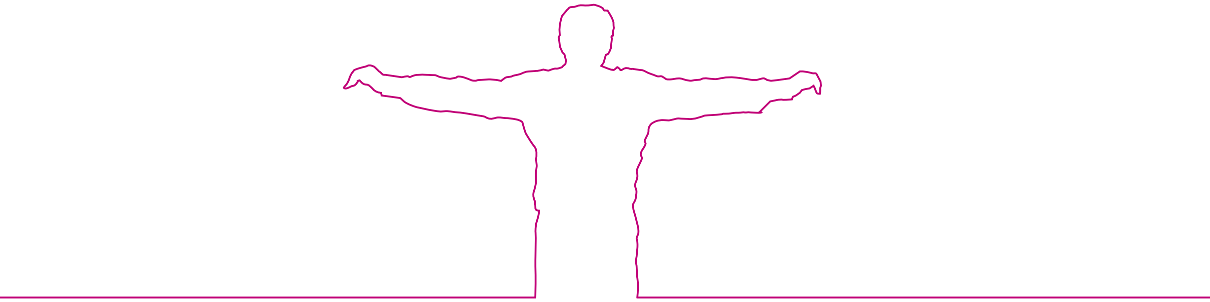
- *which leads to*

- *as a consequence*

- *this causes*

A final note of caution: do not see the principle of meaning as a tedious and simplistic step in the writing process. It does not mean helping readers less perceptive than you understand what you believe is painfully obvious. Rather, you should see it as a very subtle, yet highly powerful way of influencing your readers' mindset.

Describing an event or labelling an emotion, forces your readers to consider things from your perspective. It's like telling people "not to think of a pink elephant", when you know most people will not be able to think of anything else. Whether readers agree with you or not, the very act of determining meaning gives you as the writer unprecedented influence over your reader. Use this power prudently and humbly.



THE FOURTH PRINCIPLE

Substance

Writing gains in meaning and credibility when it is substantiated. Factual statements and ambitious claims should be verified or elaborated. Substantiation leads to communication that empowers and respects stakeholders.

Spin is common in business, where fierce competition can prompt organisations to exaggerate. Suddenly, every organisation is a leader in some field or other and every product is the result of cutting-edge technology. With their competitors shouting at the same pitch, the result is a chorus that is dull, predictable and, to those the fluff is intended for, annoying.

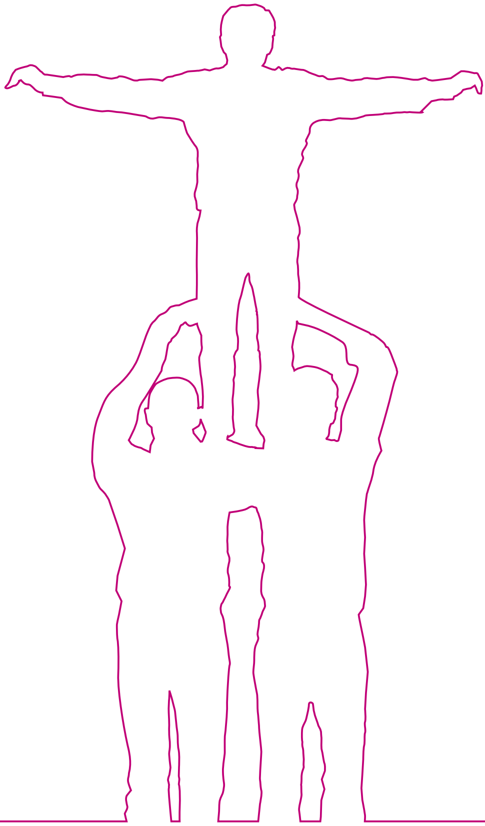
To be fair, there is no harm in laying a claim to fame. A claim to leadership, superiority or excellence can help organisations appear better than their competitors. A company's vision and mission are often ambitious, and companies need to be ambitious if they are to remain competitive. It is not unreasonable to use a persuasive approach to rally members of the organisation behind the company's mission and vision.

The question is: how do you balance ambition with prudence in a way that is credible yet appealing?

Today, your stakeholders are significantly more demanding, informed, and opinionated. This is due to more consumer-friendly legislation, the power of litigation, and the empowering effect of technology. As a result of this, stakeholders – whether they are consumers, investors, staff, regulators etc. – need to be approached in a different way. Empowerment and respect are keys to this new approach.

Empowerment means enabling stakeholders to make judgements of their own, rather than force-feeding them biased views from headquarters. Respect means that you communicate with stakeholders in a mature and intelligent way, instead of assuming that people will buy any old claim just because it says so on the box. The willingness to believe the organisation is no longer unconditional and everlasting.

To avoid expensive litigation or damage to your reputation, business writers need to practise the fourth principle: substance. Substance means content that is significant, complementary and verifiable. In other words: substance means something to people,



adds something to what they already know or feel and hasn't been corrupted by spin.

Substance can take various forms:

- *Case studies, for example to substantiate claims of market leadership or the company's capabilities in a particular area. Case studies can be simple descriptions of a particular problem, its solution and the result. Instead of just saying something abstract like 'we develop leaders in the banking sector', you can describe how one of your clients felt the need to teach senior managers people skills, what program was developed and the result.*

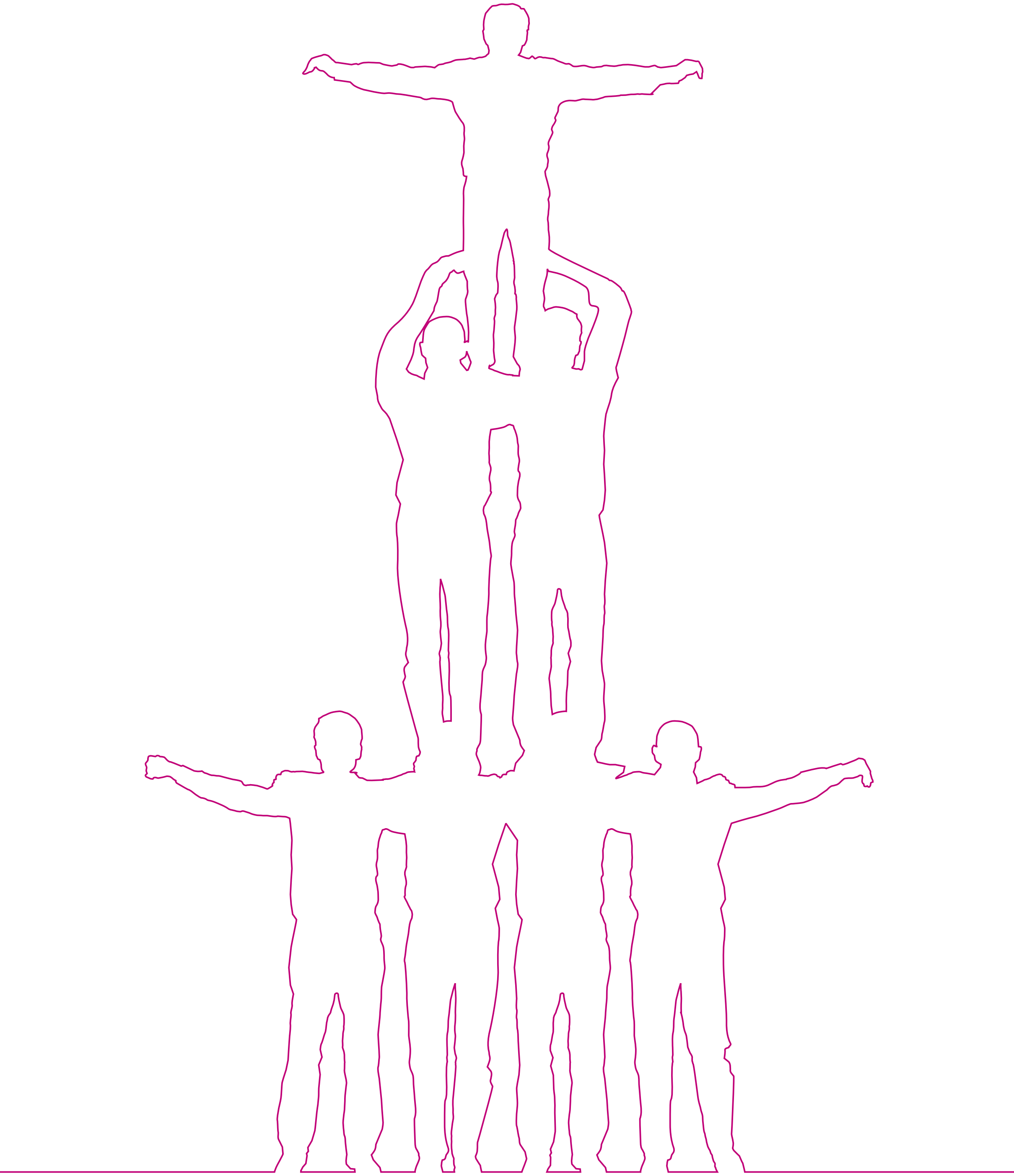
- *Testimonials from users, who share their experiences with your organisation's products or services. Happy customers and employees are the most credible ambassadors a company can have. Giving them a voice can help prospective clients or talent decide whether your company is right for them.*

- *Research from independent organisations, such as reviews from technology websites or professional research institutes. In Europe, for example, cars can be tested for safety by Euro NCAP. Their star rating is frequently used in ads of automobile makers to substantiate their car safety claims.*

- *Formal recognition from reputable and neutral parties (such as those awarding ISO certification or Investor in People accreditation), particularly when they compare organisations to objective criteria.*

- *Visible action, to substantiate promises or allow people to experience something for themselves. Companies can claim they care for the environment, however; if all head office employees ride to work on company bicycles, the statement is more credible.*

- *Have other stakeholders confirm your claim. While it's easy for the CEO to say the company has improved conditions at its Asian factories, it is far more persuasive to have an NGO say they verified the claim and agree the workers are better off.*



Substance tends to closely follow or precede meaning, and in fact, substance is sometimes used to create meaning. An example of this could be the following sequence of sentences:

> *We are an innovative organisation [statement]. Our customers regularly receive software updates [substantiation], as a result of which they are able to be more productive [meaning]. According to the Consumer Protection Society, our customers receive more value for money as a result of this [substantiation] and are eager to recommend our software to colleagues [meaning]. This way, we make more profit, part of which is earmarked for innovation [meaning].*

One word of caution: the principles of focus and substance can pull a text in conflicting directions. Focus values brevity – this allows the reader to grasp the main issues. Substantiation requires additional information that adds context and detail. While you should not choose one principle at the expense of the other, you need to balance the two.

For the sake of efficiency and control, it's probably best to use focus as the lead principle. Focus guides you when building a text from the ground up, particularly when the process is guided by a brief and an outline. Once the main structure of the text has been prepared, and the text meets the goals and needs of the project, you are free to add details.

THE FIFTH PRINCIPLE

Structure

Structure helps readers to relate to the purpose and meaning of a text, even when the subject matter is highly complex. A good structure leads the reader through your text by using techniques like sequence, consistency, guidance and balance.

As we discussed in the chapter on focus, most business subjects are so complex you need to limit what and how you write. By choosing the right scope and scale of your text, you can make the writing manageable for yourself and pleasing to readers. Now, if focus allows you to develop a writing strategy, then structure is your way to execute it. This chapter suggest ways to improve the structure of a text, specifically by using techniques called sequence, consistency, guidance and balance.

Sequence

Sequence is the order in which your story unfolds. A good sequence creates flow, or an order of events that is so natural that the reader can follow the text without any difficulty. A good sequence has a logical transition from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph. Ideally, each paragraph is a stepping stone to the next, preparing the reader to understand more. A simple question to ask while writing is: does this paragraph or sentence help the reader to understand the next one?

A sequence of paragraphs dealing with a new product X could be:

- *Description of how people solve a particular problem in their life*
- *Limitations of available products*
- *Consequences of these limitations*
- *Product X features, compared to existing products*
- *Product X benefits, compared to existing products*
- *What Product X could mean to people's lives*

A sequence of paragraphs for a presentation of a team's plan for next year could be as follows:

- *Last year's business environment*
- *Last year's goals and outcomes*
- *Changes in the business environment*
- *Challenges and opportunities*
- *Next year's goals*
- *Action required to achieve these goals*
- *People, processes and budget needed to accomplish these goals*

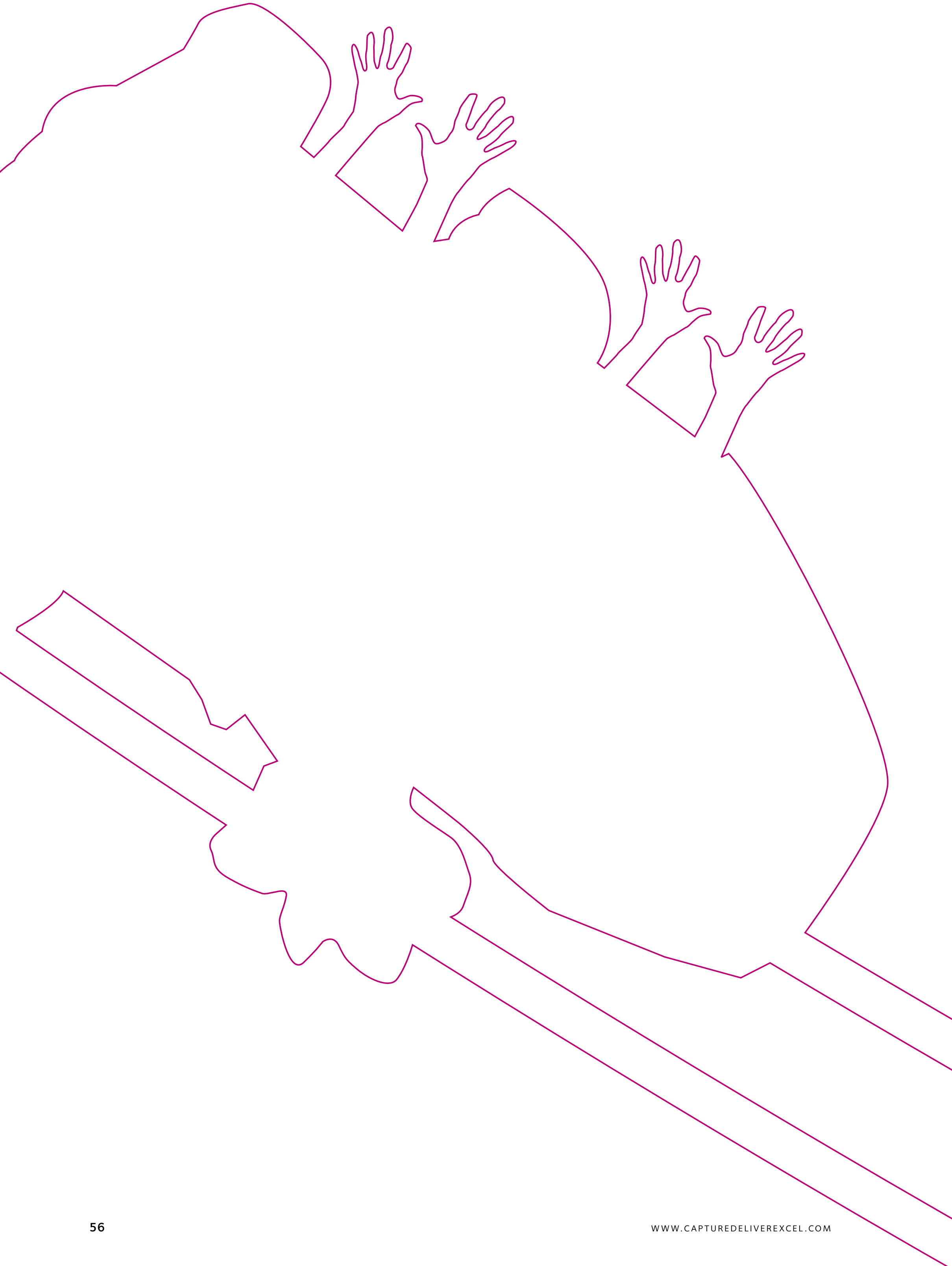
Consistency

Consistency is an important tool for guiding the reader through a story. Using the same style, point of view, and the same words when referring to the same object prevents misunderstandings. Specifically:

- *Be careful when a text is the result of team work, particularly when several people have commented on draft versions of the text. This usually results in a patchwork of styles, making it hard for the reader to focus. The chapter on the writing process shares some tips on dealing with this.*

- *Refer to people, places and things in the same way. If you are talking about a new digital camera, use either 'the camera' or the product name 'Image-View 1300-Z'. If you are writing about Joe Smith, refer to him as 'Mr Smith', 'Smith' or 'Joe', but don't mix all three in the same text.*

- *Use the same point of view. Do you use the first person plural 'we' or third person singular 'the organisation'? The first option is more subjective, personal and is well suited for internal communication purposes. The second option is more suited to objective analysis used in external publications. Whatever perspective you use, don't mix the two styles.*



Guidance

Sequence and consistency help you to structure the story in the best possible way on a macro level. On a micro level, when dealing with individual sentences and words, you can help the reader navigate the text using cue words. These guide the reader in connecting different parts of the story, pay particular attention to what is about to be discussed and see relevant relations or discrepancies. The following are examples of such techniques:

Priming

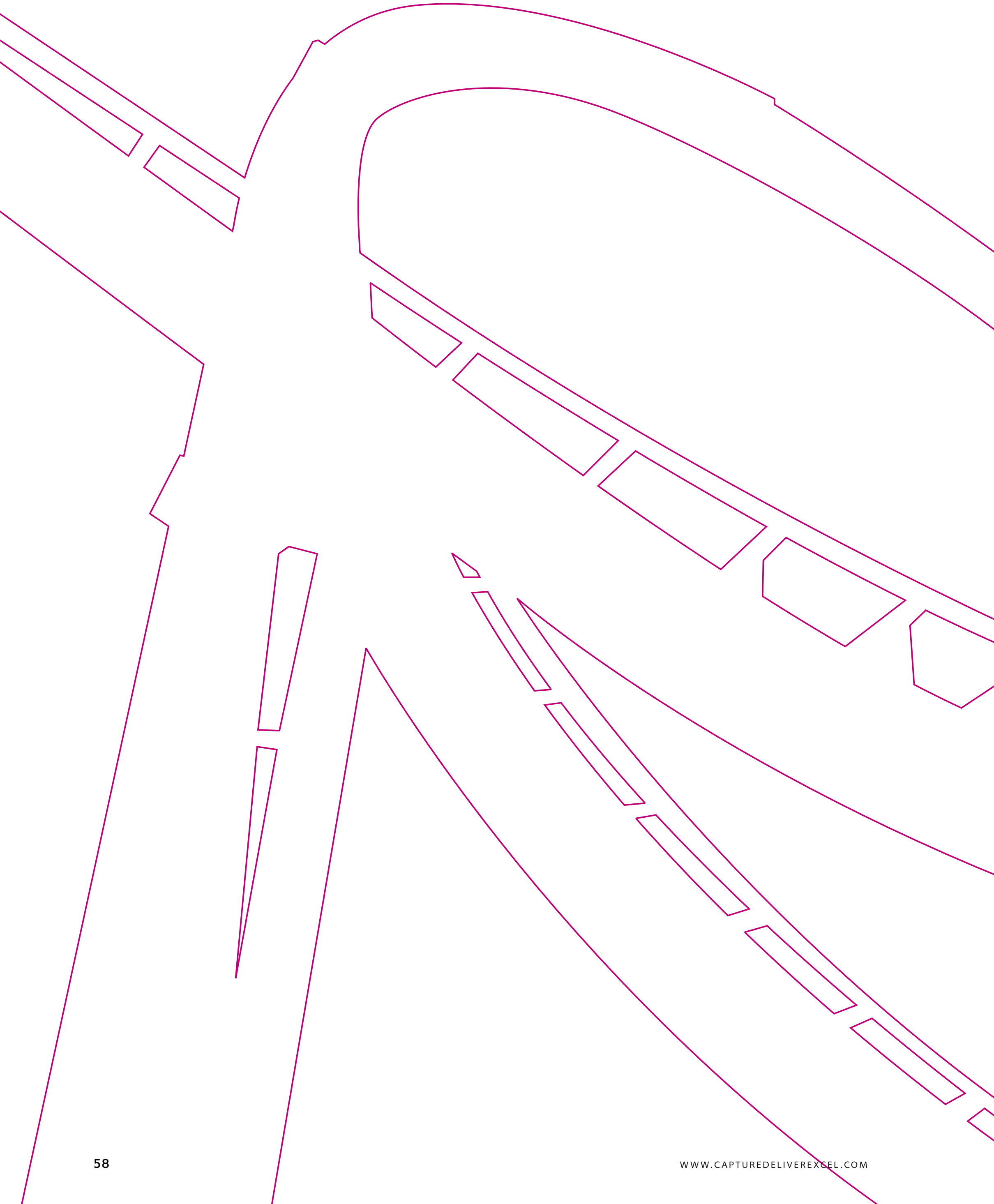
Priming is a technique used to focus readers' attention on a specific part of the text. Priming is used to indicate the transition into a new segment, a relationship between two parts of a text or something that is yet to be discussed. Examples are:

- *'Once that part of the process was finalised, we'*
- *'As the next slide will show'*
- *'but this will be dealt with more extensively when'*
- *'This will be discussed in chapter six'*
- *'This means that'*
- *'As result of that'*
- *'Due to this'*
- *'As a consequence'*

Juxtapositions

Showing relevant differences between aspects of an issue can lead to valuable insights. It can show alternative perspectives or pinpoint dilemmas. These cue words are best used at the beginning of sentences or paragraphs, where they are easy to spot. This also allows readers to scan the text quickly for the relevant parts. Examples include:

- *However:* *'Last year, we said we would cut costs. However, we didn't achieve this goal.'*
- *Nevertheless:* *'We focused our resources on developing product X. Never-*



	theless, we allowed a small team to use their spare time to develop product Y.'
At the same time:	*'We have reduced the number of staff to 1,500, but at the same time we hired more staff in the other business unit.'*
Irrespective:	*'Irrespective of the team's performance this quarter, we will get a bonus this year.'*
In spite of:	*'In spite of the performance of the Widgets Division, the CEO will not step down.'*

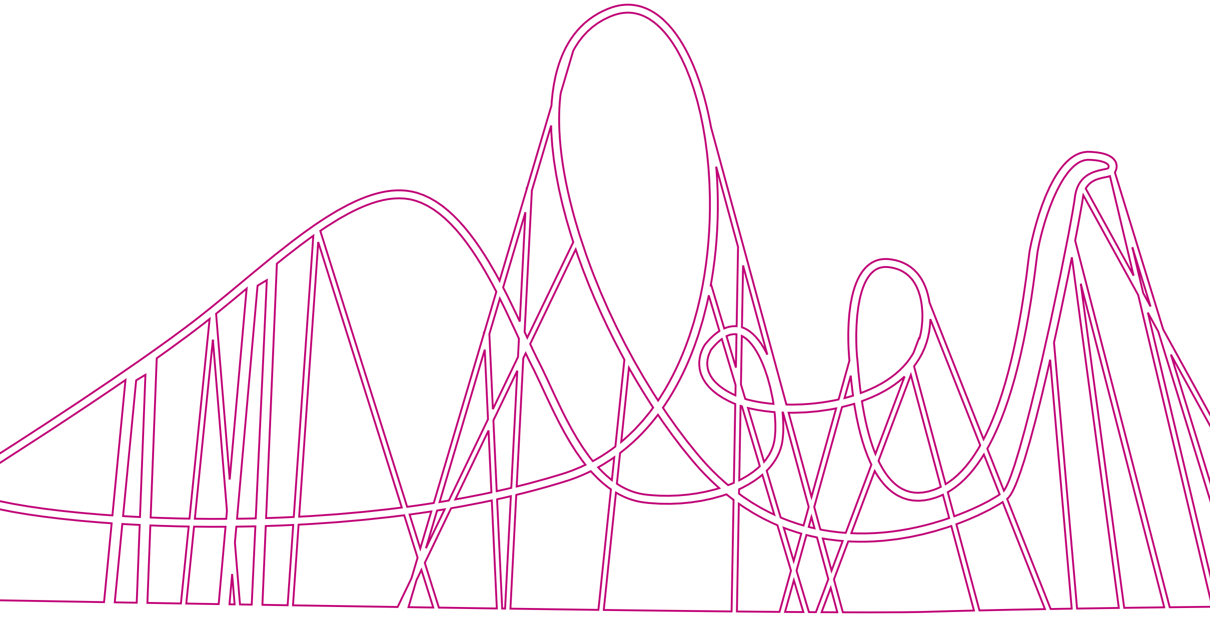
Commonalities
By emphasising what is common across two or more issues, you can build rapport with the reader, particularly when the shared qualities are closely linked to the reader's values and beliefs. To emphasise commonalities, use words like:

Similar to:	*'This part of the process is similar to the one we tackled last year, in that it is....'*
Share:	*'Even though our departments appear to have different views, we share many of the values and interests that make us who we are.'*
Together:	*'Together, we can make sure this company becomes even stronger that it already is.'*

Repetition
A good structure uses repetition to reinforce meaning or help readers understand a sequence of arguments. It can also be used as a stepping stone from one part of the text to another one. The following could have been taken from a speech in which a CEO announced a change programme:

> *'As I said earlier, we are facing two challenges. I have discussed the first one, more stringent legislation, and would like to move to the second challenge, a new competitor.'*

Summarising
You may find it useful to end a segment in your story with a recap of the main points. Summaries within a text offer a natural point for reflection and indicate that a new part of the story is about to start. If, for example, a business case has so far discussed market developments in, say, MP3 players and then discussed the company's pipeline, then a way to start the next segment on innovation could be something like this:

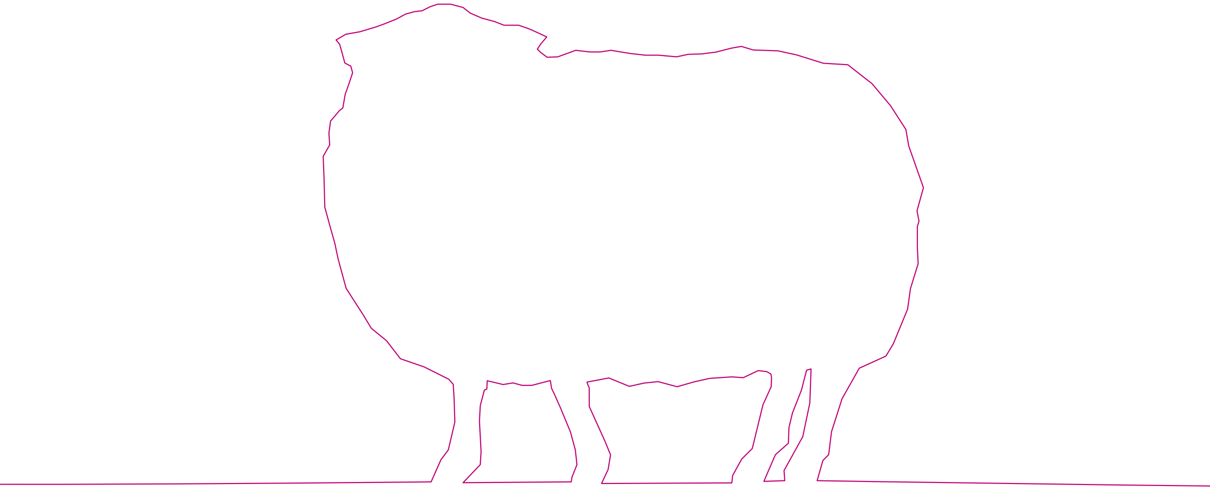


> *'So, considering that market demand for high-end MP3 players is rising, and we only have one such player under development, we need to invest more in innovation.'*

Enumeration
It helps the reader when a sequence is announced and managed. You first need to announce that *'the implementation plan will have four phases'*, or that there are *'three different prototypes we are considering for production'*. The next step is to help the reader by enumerating the steps: *'First we'*, *'The second option', 'Thirdly,'* and *'Lastly,'*. These words are more effective when used at the beginning of sentences and paragraphs.

Balance

The length of sentences and paragraphs has an effect on the structure as a whole. A balanced text is easier to read, particularly when dealing with a complex subject and the reader has less attention than perhaps you would like. So what is balance and how do you achieve it in writing? Balance means that a sentence or paragraph is long enough to gain momentum, but not long enough to exhaust. Consider an optimum of around 2 to 3 lines for a sentence and 6 to 10 lines for a paragraph. Avoid using short sentences too often. Those that are very short. They break the rhythm of a text. This is annoying. One short sentence is okay. Two are fine as well. But don't overdo it.



THE SIXTH PRINCIPLE

Clarity

Clarity comes from presenting the essence of a story in a self-evident way, so that readers' thinking is galvanised around a lucid and compelling idea. While the groundwork for clarity is laid by applying the previous five principles, it is by editing and asking probing questions that you make clear what matters most.

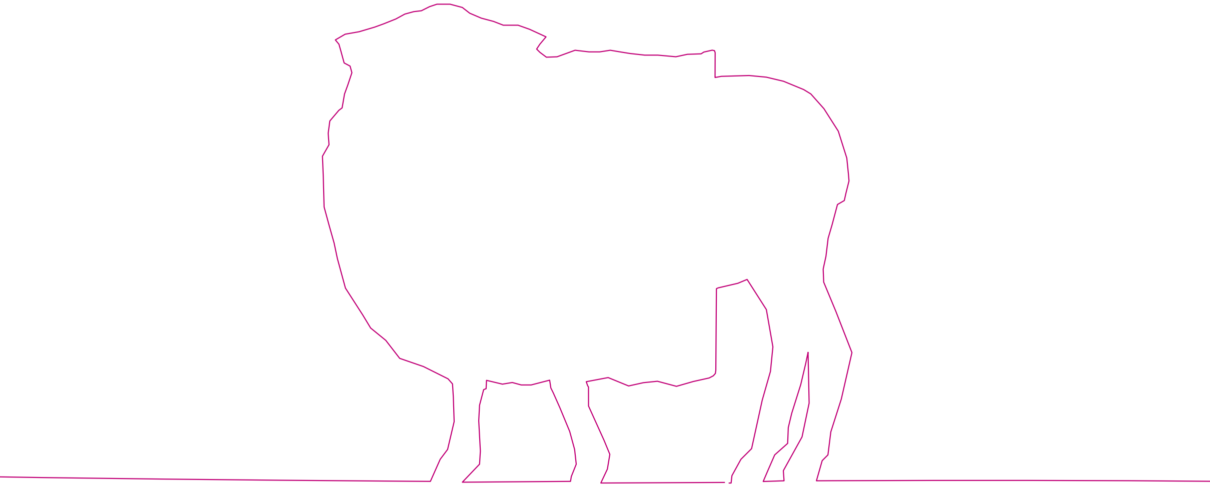
While language helps us to connect to others and create understanding and empathy, it can never capture the fullness of our inner world. The process of interpreting someone's words, in turn, is equally ambiguous and is heavily influenced by our personal and cultural background. Because of this, that organisations should strive for clarity in their written materials.

Clarity is not merely a matter of efficiency, or of saying much with few words, but of accurately describing what matters in a way simple and compelling enough for others to act on. Clarity in business is essential, as the environment is ambiguous enough as it is. This is readily reflected in the use of jargon and corporate doublespeak. Clarity is an excellent strategy for dealing with corporate complexity.

But what exactly is clarity? Picture in your mind's eye a clear photograph that you have once taken: the colours are crisp, the contrast is sharp, and your eyes automatically focus on the subject that matters. Or, listen in your head to the sound of a cello playing a single note: the sound is smooth, pleasing and exactly how it should be. Similar descriptions apply to business writing as well, as clarity of language is characterised by a number of qualities:

- The content is essential and self-evident. This means the words capture the most elementary features and leave no room for interpretation. Clarity comes, first and foremost, from identifying the essence of a story, the core of an idea, by formulating the executive summary of the executive summary. That core might prompt wonder or disagreement, but there can be no doubt as to the meaning when a text is clear.

- The style of writing is simple. Simple in this case means using words or sentences that are easy to understand, particularly when there are more difficult alternatives. Simple doesn't mean dumb or superficial. On the contrary,



simplicity means someone has penetrated the core of an issue and explained it with vision and conviction. Simplicity communicates, complexity confuses.

- The writing is frugal and economic. Few, not many words are used. This makes it easier for readers to follow the thread of your story or the point of your argument. Frugality doesn't mean writing without flair or a personal style, it means allowing readers to focus and make optimal use of their time and concentration. So rather than inundating people with chit-chat, lengthy anecdotes, and detailed descriptions, keep it short and sweet!

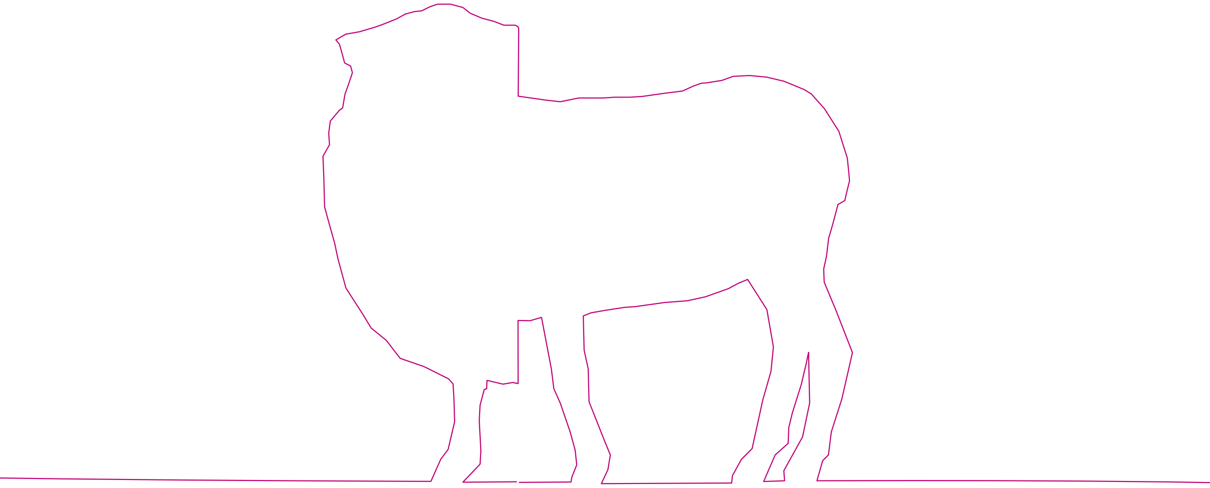
- The text is constructed logically, with each layer supporting the next. This means that paragraphs or chapters function as logical bridges to the next part of your story, in a way that – almost literally – takes your reader through your thoughts step by step. Remember, good structure creates clarity, a bad structure undermines clarity.

- The story flows. This means the sentences and paragraphs have a rhythm. Flow is a quality that is difficult to describe in words, it is almost a physical quality of language that is experienced rather than understood. What you should look for, is whether there is harmony between the flow on the one hand and the content and structure on the other.

Probing your text

One important thing to remember when striving for clarity is that clarity occurs on a deep and fundamental level in the hierarchy of ideas. In other words: clarity comes from digging deep into the fabric of your story, from critically probing projects, targets and plans and identifying the underlying currents and building blocks. Seeking clarity is like peeling an onion: removing layer after layer of issues, ideas and emotions until you get to the core and the essence of an issue.

How do you do that? In some ways seeking clarity is an intuitive process that requires lots of thinking and waiting for the penny to drop. Finding the essence of a story usually leads to a strong feeling of 'eureka', when it is obvious the core has been reached. You can use three strategies to aid your intuition: applying the preceding five principles, diligently editing your work and asking questions throughout the process. Let's consider these in more detail.



Applying the principles of focus, purpose, meaning, substance and structure

To a certain degree, clarity can be achieved by applying the previous five principles:

- Focus creates a lean story with a sense of direction
- Purpose and meaning allow you to express yourself genuinely, while allowing the reader to relate to your writing
- Substance provides proof and evidence
- Structure ensures the end result is presented coherently.

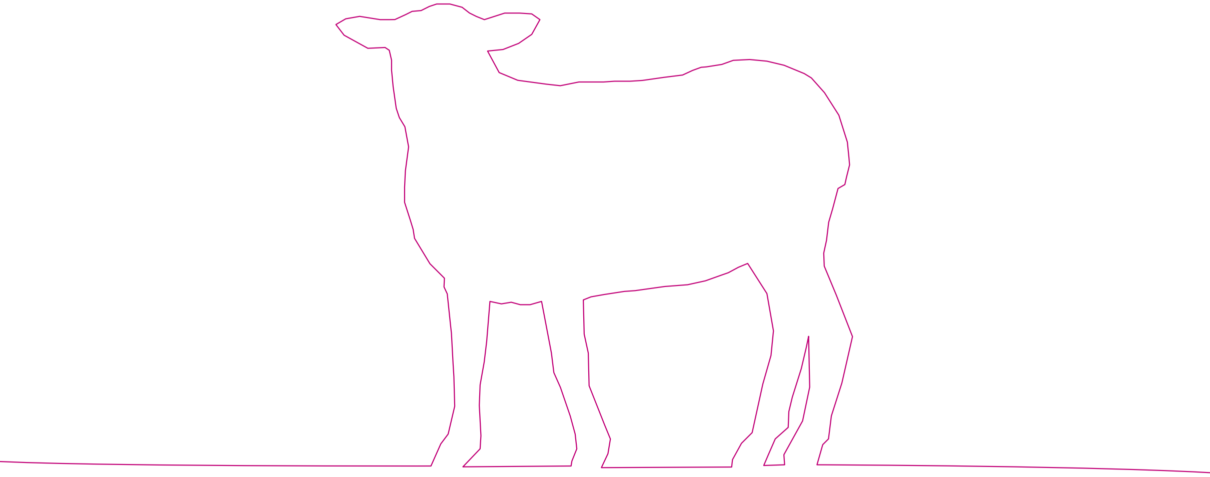
Applying these five principles in unison helps you create a text that is able to touch or teach readers with ease. While working on the basics of your story, make sure you check regularly whether your writing is essential, self-evident, simple, logically structured and flowing naturally. In this phase of the writing process, clarity is not something that is actively sought, but a mental check in the background while focusing on the other principles.

What this preliminary work will achieve is the basic structure of a story, with a rudimentary direction, style, and building blocks. The emphasis here is on ‘basic’, in that the application of the first five principles is effective but not enough. To achieve clarity, you need to roll up your sleeves, check your ego at the door and start editing.

Editing

Editing is like sculpting: you start with a big slab of marble and chip away until the final shape emerges. Editing requires ruthlessness regarding your own work, which can be hard considering all the blood, sweat ands tears you have invested in it. Clarity, however, is achieved by getting rid of everything that is not essential and rewriting your text until you have found the best way to express something.

Clarity is best achieved during the editing phase because of the distance you put between yourself and the text when reviewing and rewriting it. This distance puts your writing in perspective and allows you to critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your work. Clarity should be your guiding principle during the editing process, a litmus test by which you check whether the focus, purpose, meaning, substance and structure are self-evident.



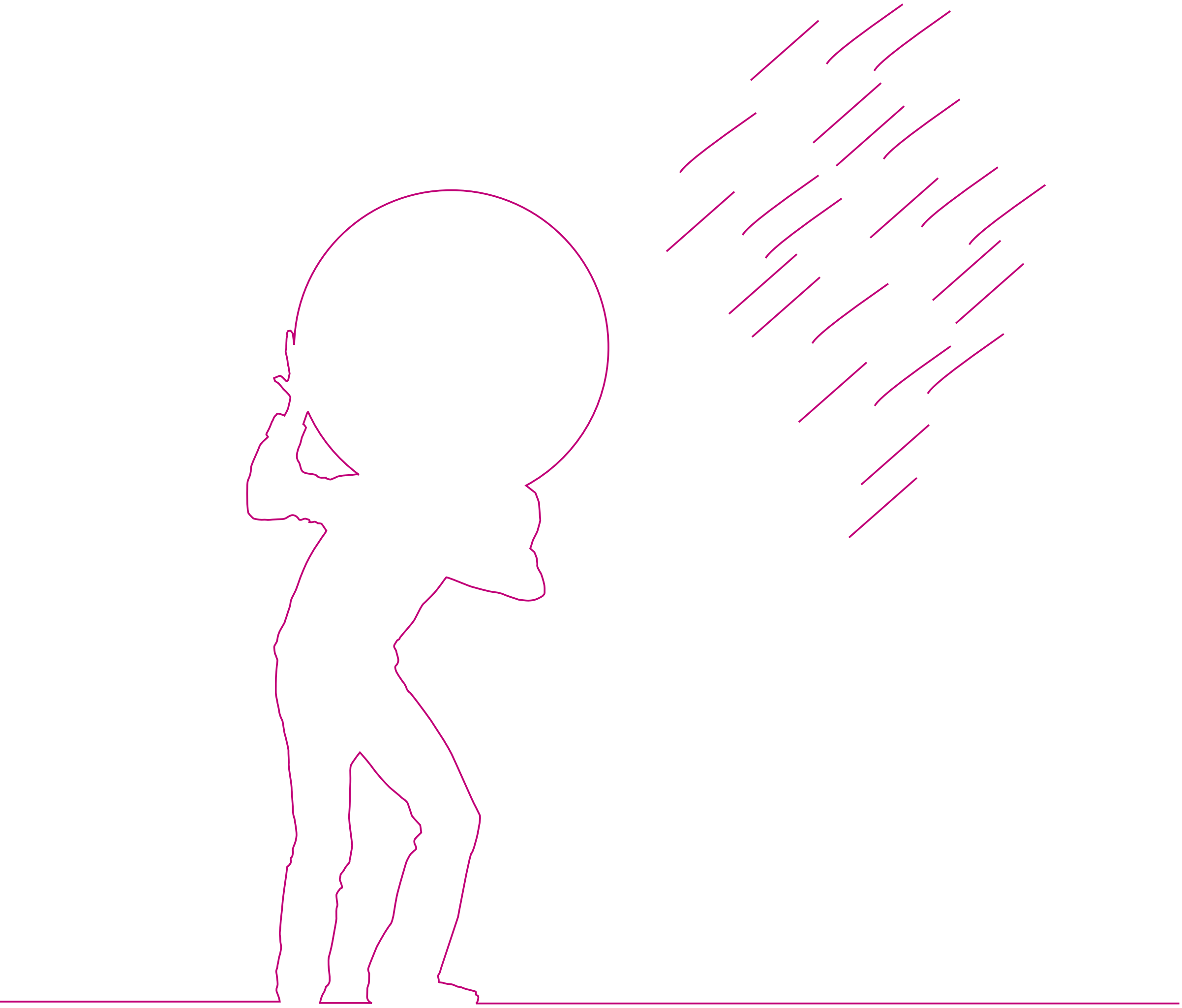
In many ways, writing and editing form a loop, or a process whose outcome is fed back into the same process until the process ceases. During the initial iteration, when applying the five principles for the first time, you will find yourself immersed in a jumble of facts, quotes, ideas and options. While editing, you take a different position, by reviewing what you have written from a distance and evaluating it with a critical, objective and unemotional eye. It is this distance that allows you to focus on whether a text is a really clear, or whether you need to prune it further for the true message to emerge.

It's difficult to say how many 'loops' you need to make, how much time you should spend editing your work, but here are a few practical pointers:

- Edit the text in a couple of iterations, provided you have the luxury of time. Writing a draft in one attempt and editing it in a single attempt could, but usually doesn't, lead to a great text. Editing is perhaps even more important than writing, so you need to make the effort to rewrite parts your text a number of times.

- Ask others to critically evaluate your work. This might yield unspecific comments such as 'I like it' or 'I don't like it', but if you dig deeper you are likely to find many useful ways to improve your text.

- Be aware of writing fatigue. When you spend a lot of time writing and even more time editing the same text, your accuracy will suffer. As a result, you will overlook mistakes in grammar, spelling, structure and flow. When fatigue sets in, take a long break (ideally a few days) or ask someone else to review your work.



THE SEVENTH PRINCIPLE

Humility

Writing is not only about technique, it is also about having the right attitude. When you are guided by humility, readers will more easily relate to your writing and allow themselves to be influenced by it. Humility is a vital strategic attitude, not a nicety.

As we discussed earlier, it's healthy to communicate about ambition as long as readers are empowered to make independent judgements and your claims can be substantiated. Unfortunately, some organisations communicate primarily by spin and a desire to defend one point of view no matter what the cost. This chapter seeks to provide an alternative to this knee-jerk reaction by discussing the principle of humility.

Though it doesn't change your ability to write well from a technical point of view, humility is an important attitude for anyone in business and anyone writing about business. People are fed up with arrogance, spin and condescending communication, so humility has become the best way to make sure your communication will be accepted by your stakeholders. In other words: humility is an entry ticket.

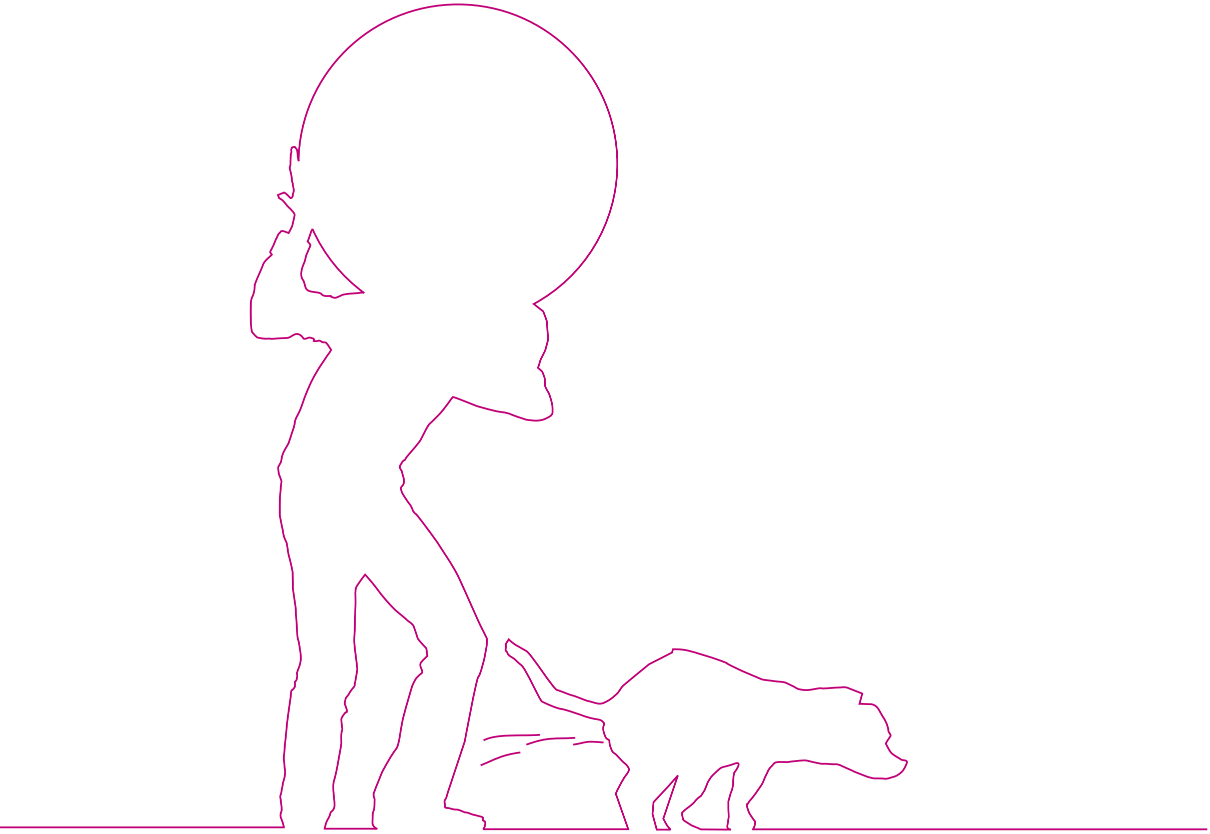
What does this mean for the practice of business writing? Humility can be achieved in different ways, specifically by:

Critically judging your writing, without regard for your ego.

This means applying the previous six principles. It is easy to become attached to a beautiful sentence or paragraph, but you need to have the guts to scrap it if, after scrutiny, it is not required. This sounds easy, in practice few people are able to discard work even if, deep down, they know that their words are exaggerated or unclear.

Evaluating your personal motives.

Effective business writing creates rapport with readers. This happens when you connect to their fundamental beliefs, values and ambitions. A humble approach seeks to recognise the validity of each stakeholder's claim. While you should consider the culture of the organisation for whom you are writing (for example hierarchical and authoritative or ad-hoc project teams), a humble approach means you respect your readers. Spin doctoring is outdated. It belongs to a time when organisations were led like the military and CEOs had a godlike status.



Today, leaders need to communicate authentically, which has consequences for how they write.

Accepting that things go wrong and not all questions can be answered.

Some organisations have such a dislike of failure that their staff will re-write a negative story to make it look beautiful when most readers are aware that it isn't. This is hypocritical and erodes the trust stakeholders have in the organisation. In a world where search engines and blogs spread news faster that your organisation can, it is safe to assume the truth will be known eventually. Face it and deal with it now.

Leaving things as they are, without resorting to spin doctoring.

This is closely related to the previous point of accepting mistakes and uncertainty, but different in that it relates more to the principle of meaning. Sometimes organisations feel the need to create much ado about nothing and fluff things up. Why does shampoo have to be a 'sensationally cleansing morning ritual' when it's just soap to rinse the grease out of your hair? Technology companies like to describe their products as 'revolutionary', even though they are the result of incremental innovations.

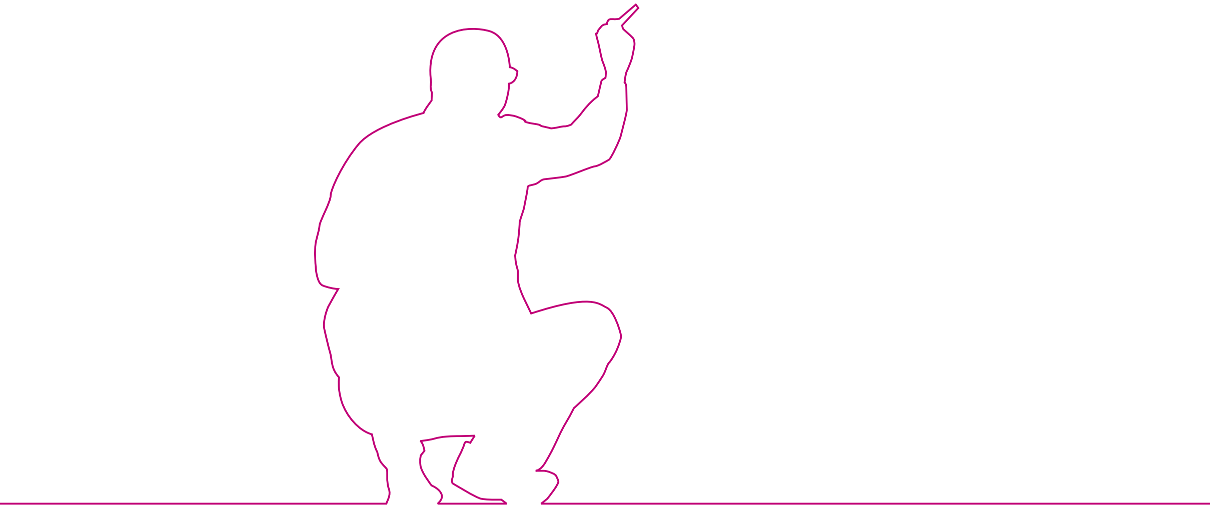
Avoiding fancy words, even if you think they make you look smarter.

This has been dealt with already, but it doesn't hurt to repeat it. Apart from not being understood, difficult words can make other people annoyed or just downright resentful. Leaders, in particular, should not hide behind difficult words or corporate jargon that subconsciously says 'I am smarter than you', or, more likely, 'I have no clue what I am talking about'.

Recognising dissenting opinions or unfavourable comments.

Forcing a picture of unity when conflict exists - particularly when it exists visibly - erodes trust in the organisation and its communication. By seeking purpose and meaning on both sides and connecting them in a text, leaders can engage all stakeholders in a productive and genuine way.

None of this means that business writing cannot make ambitious claims. Neither does it mean that business writing cannot be eloquent or entertaining, nor that you aren't allowed to write passionately. What it does mean is that business writing is much better if ambition is underpinned by realism, self-criticism and respect for the views of all stakeholders. Humility allows companies to express their vision and expertise in a genuine way that builds trust and reputation with the reader.



The writing process

phase 1: determining roles and rules

phase 2: developing a brief and outline

phase 3: conducting a stakeholder analysis

phase 4: conducting research and interviews

phase 5: writing a first draft

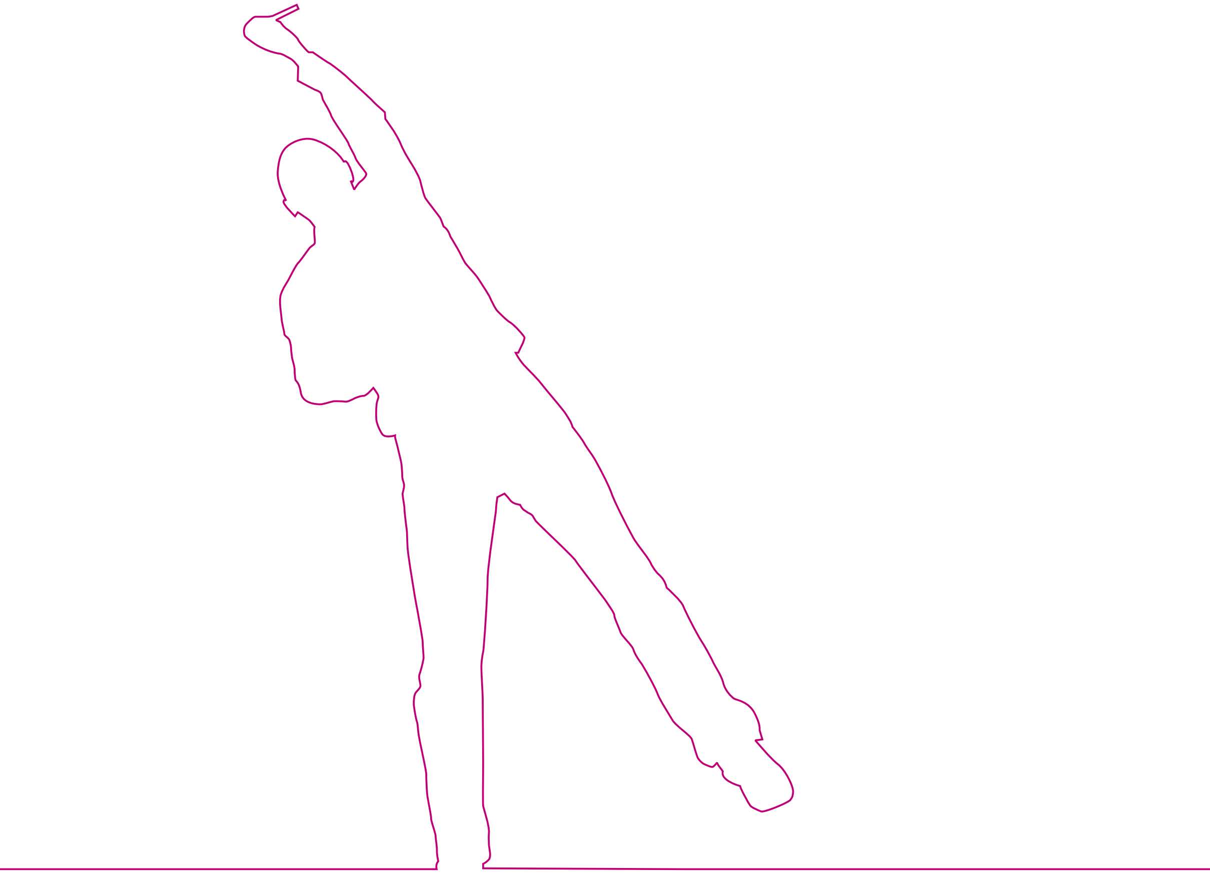
phase 6: editing first and subsequent drafts

phase 7: getting to sign off

The writing process, particularly when involving different people and crucial subjects, can be quite a headache. This chapter explains the different phases of the writing process and provides you with the tools to manage them.

Writing about organisations is a political and strategic activity. Writing casts ideas and emotions in stone, which makes text the memory and consciousness of the organisation. Writing can also align stakeholders, making it the grease in the complex machine called The Office. Business writing, therefore, should not be taken lightly.

The writing process can be long, take unexpected twists and turns and involve people with strongly differing views. Depending on the number of people involved, your level of expertise and seniority, and the strategic importance of the text, you will find that you and your text get pulled in various directions. To help you prepare for this tussle, this chapter examines the different phases of the writing process and how to manage each of them.



phase 1: determining roles and rules

As with any project, it pays off to determine roles and rules before you or anyone else starts to write. This allows participants to use their time efficiently and minimises confusion about how the process should unfold.

Roles

There are a few roles to be determined:

- The Principal: the person who gives you the writing assignment. Usually also the person who determines the rules, such as those relating to deadlines and scope and scale. Ideally, but not necessarily, the person to brief you.

- The Writer: project manager and creative brain, manages the process, catalyses decision-making and writes the first draft of the text.

- The Editor: seeks feedback on a text and incorporates feedback in new versions of the document. Usually the writer, but sometimes someone else.
- Commentators: comment on the story from their expert position. Sometimes commentators are invited in recognition of their hierarchical position only, meaning people at lower levels of the organisation may know more about the subject.

- The Proofreaders: concerned with the technical quality of the writing in the final stages of the process.
  Proofreaders fix spelling and grammatical mistakes or make minor edits to the flow of sentences or paragraphs. Because they have not been involved in the earlier stages of the process, they bring a fresh pair of eyes and a critical mind to the process.

- The Designers: create a visually compelling counterpart to the text. Sometimes you need to work with them to tweak a story so that it complies with the design requirements, or vice-versa. It is advisable to involve designers from the very start, as their expertise can help the text to have significantly more impact.

- Silent Partners: copied in on draft versions of the text because of their position - often at higher levels of the organisation - or their interests. Tend not to be involved in the practical struggles of the writing team, but can intervene when the writing takes a strategically bad course or sudden organisational

developments require a new approach.

- The Boss: signs off a text at the end of the writing process. Sometimes, but not always, the Principal.

By assigning these roles to people you are going to work with on the project, you can better manage the process. Depending on the size of the task, the writing team may be anywhere between one or 10 or more people. In a small team people have multiple roles, in a large team, there may be one role per person. The rule of thumb is: the more people are involved, the more important it is to manage the process effectively.

When choosing how many people to involve, you need to balance efficiency with buy in. Getting few people on board means agreement can be reached easily, but means you risk alienating others from the process and outcome. Involving large groups of people, on the other hand, can result in a lengthy and cumbersome process, but does increase the chance that the majority of people will be comfortable with the result.

Rules

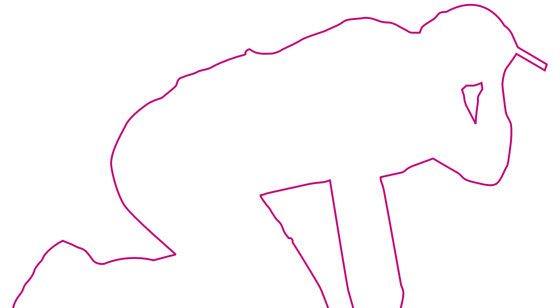
Rules are the written and unwritten guidelines by which the writing team needs to abide. Rules can relate to the deadline, the scope and scale of the writing, people and their roles, who gets interviewed and how much research will be done. Effective rules streamline the writing process and help ensure efficient use of scarce resources, including airtime with the Boss or the amount of space reserved in the corporate magazine. It is useful to include the roles and rules in the brief.

The reality is that, no matter how well you prepare the process, roles and rules will change during the writing process. People who were involved in the early stages of the process will suddenly drop out because of other priorities, or people who missed 90% of the writing process will suddenly appear towards the end with suggestions for alterations.

phase 2: developing a brief and outline

In the chapter dealing with focus we discussed the merits of developing a brief and outline. These help you decide what and how to write and who to involve. Now we will take a more detailed and technical look at what constitutes a good brief and outline.

The need to write tends to come from an assignment from someone, whether it's a superior asking for a report or a trade journal requesting an article for next month's



issue. Either way, you will need to define the scope of the assignment, establish the deadline and writing requirements and mobilise resources to get the desired result.

The initial brief tends to be vague. It is often described in general terms such as ‘writing about your company’s expertise in supply chain management’ or ‘sharing your views on the dilemma between social responsibility and the needs of shareholders’. This means that the subject matter and the perceived need are broadly defined, and that people are looking to you to create a more detailed story. This translates into freedom for you to decide what is best for your organisation, as well as the responsibility to lead people to develop the focus, substance and other ingredients for your story.

The best way to use this freedom is to write a brief. The chapter on focus already suggested a number of questions to ask when developing a brief, but more preparation is needed, for example:

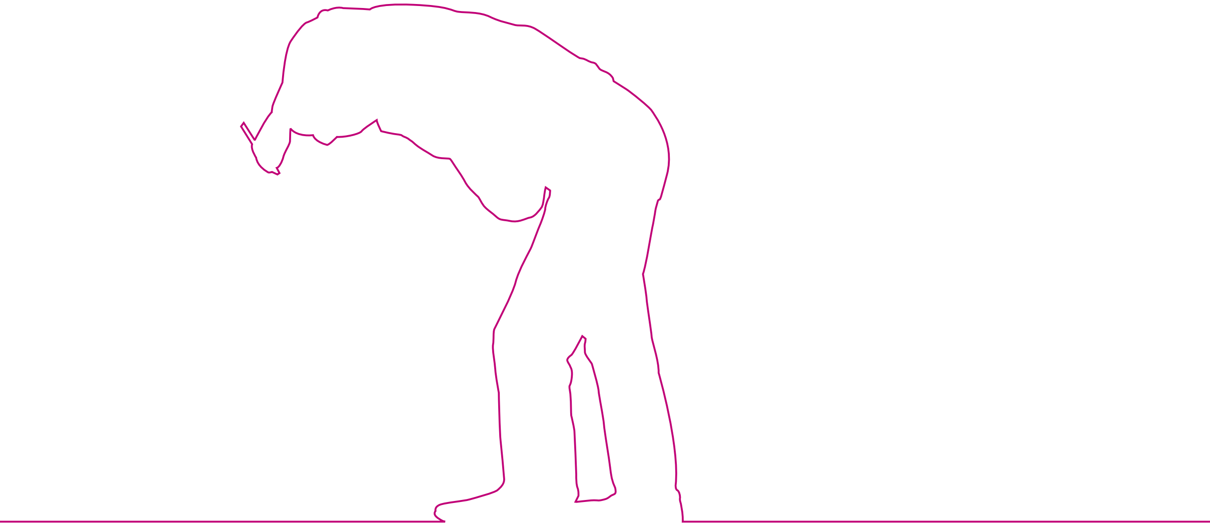
- Doing preliminary research. This is important if you do not have in-depth knowledge of the issues you need to address. You can browse through trade journals, strategic analyses, newsletters, or similar documents. The goal is not to become an expert, but to get the highlights.

- Holding exploratory talks with stakeholders. Finding two or three insiders for a brief chat can often yield priceless insights into the state of an industry or the topics that are really hot. This will provide further clues about what to focus on in your research and writing.

- Analysing your individual stakeholders. As described previously in this book, you need to identify their interests, needs, attitudes, behaviours, values, beliefs and ambitions. This will show you the force field within which you are writing and will show you how to align your writing with those stakeholders most crucial to you.

- Analysing the strategic and operational field. This involves understanding the organisation’s strategy, the internal dynamics of your organisation and changes in the competitive field. This will help you decide on what writing strategy to adopt.

- Deciding on the impact you want your text to have. You will need to keep in mind the organisation’s (team’s, department’s, business unit’s etc.) business and communications strategy. One important question to ask is: how should



the text influence the attitude and behaviour of the stakeholders in this business context and with these goals in mind?

Ideally, all these items come together in a brief for yourself or the people with whom you work. A written brief is also useful for requesting feedback and asking for approval for a particular approach. Feedback should be incorporated in subsequent versions of the brief and signed off if required. Incidentally, the goal is not to get a brief that is 100% right. While writing and editing the text, a range of new questions and issues are likely to crop up. For now, the goal is to get a clear view of what and how you want to write.

After the brief has been finalised, turn it into an outline. As was discussed during the chapter on focus, the goal is to decide on the structure of the text and where and how you need to substantiate your material. The main requirement is the sequence: the text should flow naturally.

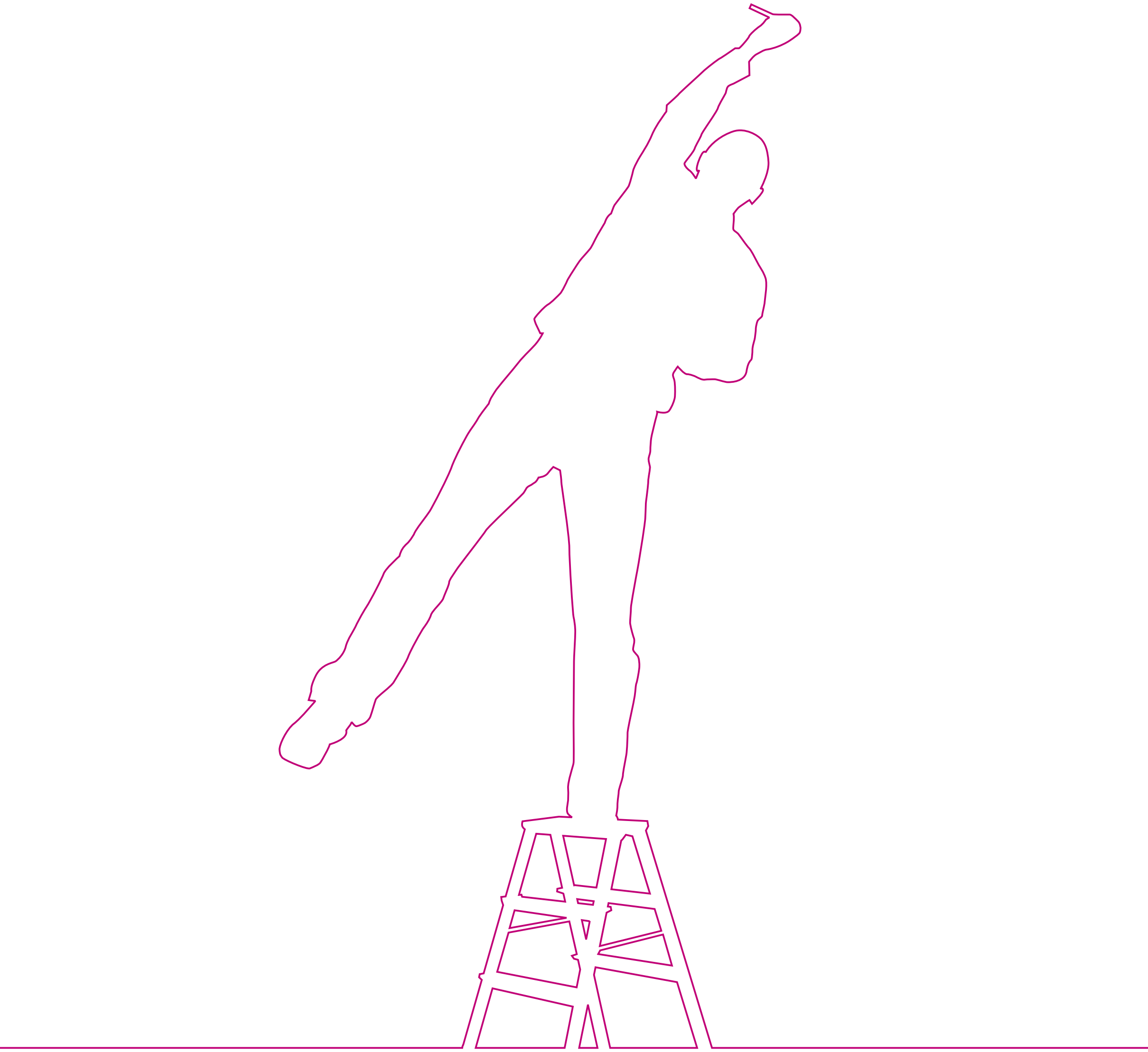
Do not underestimate the importance of this phase. While it serves a practical goal - focusing your attention - it has a far more important strategic role. In this phase decisions are made about what and how you will write, and for whom your text is meant. If the brief and outline are signed off by a senior decision-maker, it will be difficult to deviate from the chosen approach in the writing and editing phases.

phase 3: conducting a stakeholder analysis

It is easy to determine the audiences for whom you can write. Determining which of these are relevant enough to spend your precious resources on requires additional thought. Your decision should be based on two criteria: the strategic context of the organisation and the specific medium or event for which the text is developed.

As for the first criterion, you should not lose sight of the fact that the overriding responsibility of a text is to serve the organisation. This means that you understand the strategy of the organisation, its competitive environment and its internal dynamics. It is within this force field that the text tries to make an impact for the good of the organisation, so any choice about what stakeholders to engage should be in line with the overall needs of the organisation.

A second issue to consider is the specific occasion of the text, meaning the medium in which it is published or the event at which a text is delivered as a presentation or speech. Both the medium and the event will have audiences of their own, meaning



some will overlap with your stakeholders and some will fall outside the text's scope. You will want to focus on the areas of overlap as far as the stakeholders are concerned. Which interests and needs you should tackle depends on the previous strategic analysis.

phase 4: conducting research and interviews

The brief and outline phase provide the strategy and structure for tackling your writing assignment. The next step is to 'fill in the gaps' by conducting thorough desktop research and interviews. The goal of this phase is to find the building blocks of your text: examples, quotes, data, case studies, opinions etc. With the brief and outline in mind, it will be easy to identify the valuable bits of information, making the process more efficient and effective. Simply put: you know what you are looking for.

Desk research means reading your way through documents that will give anecdotes, data, examples, case studies or background info you can include in your story. A good way to source such information is to simply contact the stakeholders with whom you will be dealing. Unless the information is highly sensitive, people are likely to help you out! Check for annual reports, PowerPoint presentations, company newsletters, speeches and articles published on an organisation's website, documents filed with your country's financial watchdog, court proceedings etc.

The goal of an interview is to get background information and, if required, valuable quotes that you can use. The best thing to do is to send the interviewee a written questionnaire with open-ended questions before the interview, so he can prepare. The main principle of holding interviews is to keep your questions short and open-ended and listen as much as possible. Most interviewers spend too much time talking themselves, because they want to share their own views, hear their own voice or simply because they get excited. The point is not to show people how smart you are, but to make optimal use of the other person's valuable time to get results.

phase 5: writing a first draft

The previous two phases will have given you a goal, and the process and elements you need to succeed. The next step is to merge these into the first full draft of the text. Unlike the previous two phases, it is important during this phase to aim for a text that is grammatically correct and eloquent. This is the first prototype or proof of principle that has to convince people that the approach you took to the writing assignment was right.

When you reach this phase, you should have a very good idea of what it is you are trying to write and how to write it. It will be much easier for you to write the first draft now that you have prepared, particularly if you keep referring back to the brief and outline. Be pragmatic, however: an outline can look good, but another structure may actually work better in practice.

phase 6: editing first and subsequent drafts

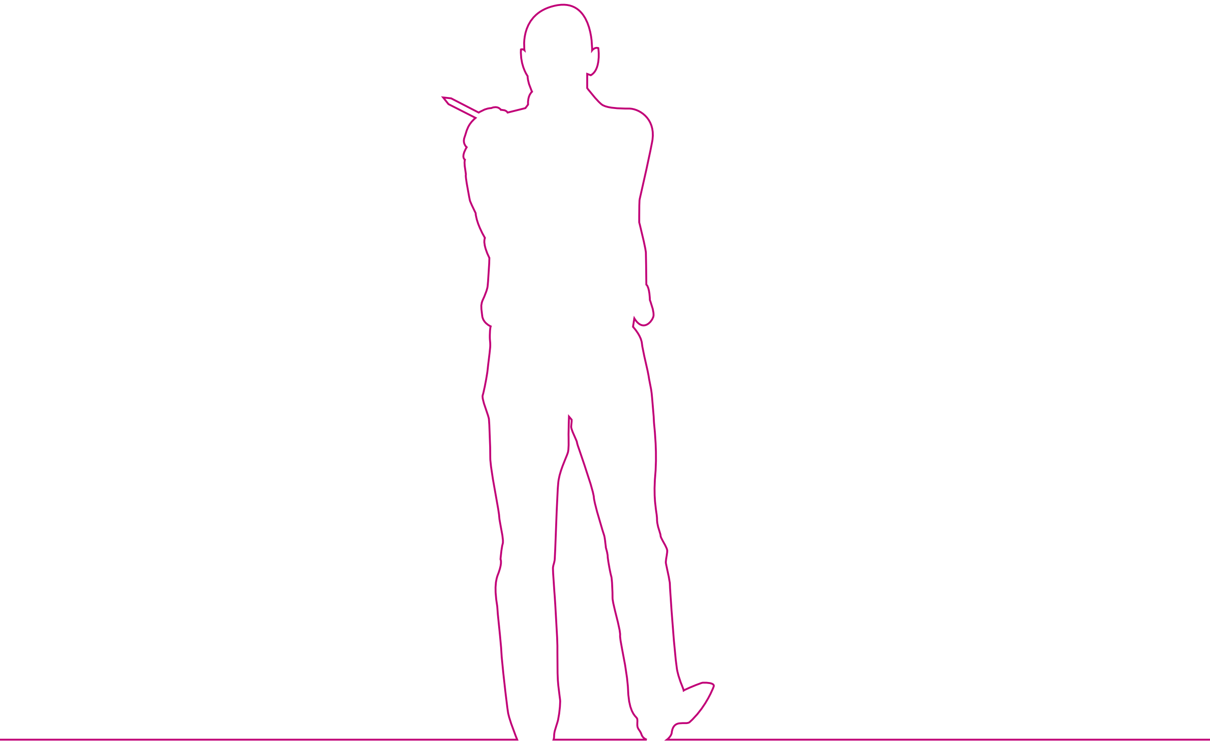
Circulating a first draft for comments is always exciting, as you are testing whether the text is able to change people's attitudes and behaviours and whether the text meets the criteria specified in the brief. You are also waiting to hear whether the text is politically acceptable and whether the juicy bits will be cut out.

The principle of humility is very important in this phase, because you should not be attached to the outcome of the editing process. The truth is that anyone asked for comments will have comments, so the more people you include in the editing process the more changes will be suggested. Being humble about such changes and positioning yourself as a neutral catalyst improves your position to mediate between different text suggestions and shields you from the potential outfall from all those comments.

This touches upon another issue: the fact that everyone makes comments doesn't necessarily reflect badly on the quality of your writing. In some cases, decision-makers previously involved in the development and sign off of the brief and outline, will look at the assignment in an entirely new way once there is a full text to review. The draft works as a mirror in which people can reflect on the issue in a way that an outline cannot.

As a result, comments on the first draft are likely to yield suggestions not only about style and structure, but also provide a fresh view of the meaning and purpose of the subject. It is not uncommon for first drafts to generate heated debate and intense dialogue about the subject. This should be encouraged, because it is natural and useful.

The chief editor needs to seek and clarify comments and decide on remedial action. Sometimes this can be as simple as tweaking a sentence or changing the order of two paragraphs. Sometimes, though, particularly when internal debate has yielded new insights and decisions, you will need to rewrite parts of the text. While this may be discouraging, it is beneficial to the quality of the text.



Using the famous 80:20 rule – which says organisations earn 80% of their income from 20% of their clients – you should be prepared for a similarly lopsided distribution of effort in writing. While the initial part of the process will be relatively smooth, the remaining 20% is likely to take 80% of your time and energy. Try to limit the number of editing rounds and seek power to make final calls on style and structure, otherwise the process will never end.

NB: in situations where different people are involved in writing and editing, people may be commenting simultaneously on different versions of the text. This is frustrating and dangerous, as you waste people's time and risk moving to the next stage without incorporating the correct changes. This problem can be solved by using version management, which requires two things: using the same document name through the process with different version numbers (e.g. Article V1.0.doc) and permitting only one person – the writer/editor – to change the version number. It is a good idea to repeat these instructions to the reviewers when sending out draft versions of the text.

phase 7: getting to sign off

By the time you have come to this final phase of the writing process – still sane and in good spirits, hopefully – there are some final small hurdles. Provided you have managed the editing process well, there should be no major outstanding issues of style and content left for discussion. The two remaining things to do are to proofread the text and to get the Boss to sign it off. As for the proofreading, it is best to have a fresh pair of eyes go through the text with a comb, with the specific assignment to only look at grammar and spelling (you don't want to start editing the text again, do you?). Incorporate the last few changes into the final version of the document, which can best be named exactly that (e.g. Article final version.doc) and send it to the Boss or Principal for final sign off.

One final note: be aware of people who get involved at the very last minute, after having missed the first 90% of work. If you haven't obtained approval from the Principal or Boss or omitted important people in the previous phases, you can be sent back to square one. If you have followed the process, try to avoid giving latecomers a reason to change things that will require you to go through the entire process again.

About the author

Ilja van Roon is the owner of Lucid Communication, a business writing agency.

Ilja writes for senior executives and professionals at blue chip firms such as ING Group, Heineken International, Atradius, DSM, TNT Group and Krauthammer International. He also writes speeches for the Dutch Minister of Economic Affairs and the Minister of Foreign Trade on topics such as the future of Europe, innovation, foreign trade, and relations with the US and Asia.

Ilja writes about four themes: global business, geopolitics, technology and people and performance. His work helps his clients to communicate their knowledge and ideas, build their reputation, grow their business and lead their organisation in times of change.

Prior to setting up his company, Ilja worked as a journalist and copywriter in the Middle East, and worked in the field of corporate communication in the Netherlands. He holds a Masters in Corporate Communication from RSM Erasmus University, the Netherlands, and studied NLP with PPD Learning in London.

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About the designers

Made of Man is a design agency that visualises product and organisation brands by developing, implementing and maintaining visual identities. In doing so, we use our greatest strength: our ability to translate strategy into compelling visuals.

In our view, organisations are increasingly becoming aware of the power of design to influence their stakeholders' thinking and feeling. That is why we believe visual identities can contribute more to product and organisation brands.

Our clients are organisations that value a good visual identity and want to use theirs in an effective way. Made of Man believes in the principle that different people reinforce each other.

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