



# Write Now

## How to Write to Sell, Persuade and Make a Difference

by Gihan Perera and Samantha Perera

**Sample**

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## Introduction

Do you have trouble putting your ideas into writing? If so, you're not alone. Most people struggle to take ideas from their head and put them into the written word.

The traditional way of writing a book, for example, is to agonise over the writing process. It can take months – even years – to find the time to write, organise your thoughts, put your ideas in writing, beat yourself up because it's not perfect, put it aside because more urgent things come along, waste countless hours in editing and re-writing, and so on.

Sound familiar? That's what happened to me (Gihan) with my first book *Secrets of Internet Business Success*<sup>1</sup>. In fact, I almost abandoned my book after writing 95% of the content because it just felt too hard to complete it!

This book shows you a different approach to writing, whether you're writing a short article for a magazine, a full book, or anything in between.

### What makes this book different?

If you visit your local book shop or library and scan the shelves for the books about writing, you'll see that they fall into two main categories:

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<sup>1</sup> Available from [www.firststep.com.au](http://www.firststep.com.au).

- ⇒ Some are educational text books about the formal rules of writing (grammar, syntax, and so on);
- ⇒ Others are about getting published as an author.

However, there are very few books about the practical aspects of writing to get a message across clearly. This book fills that gap.

Our goal is to help you to *write*. We won't teach you how to write perfectly (we leave that to the educational texts, if you require them), and we won't teach you how to get your writing published (we leave that to the marketing books). We just want to get you *writing!*

### Why does it seem so hard?

Most people are very good at what they do, whether it's their profession, their hobby, or simply an area of interest. And most people can *speak* clearly and effectively about their fields of interest. Yet they find writing to be a challenge.

This is partly because they think of writing as a much more formal communication method than speaking. While they're quite happy to speak about their area of expertise (or even an area on which they're *not* an expert!), when it comes to writing they're hesitant and unsure. In fact, the average person starts editing, censoring and deleting their words even *before* they start writing.

Most people aren't actually poor writers, but they *see* themselves as poor writers. As a result, they don't give themselves the amount of practice at writing they get from speaking. Almost everyone *has* to speak; whereas if you choose to, you can usually avoid writing. As a result, poor writing comes not because you don't know how to write, but because you lack *experience* writing.

You might also have bad memories about experiences with writing in English classes at school – especially when you were assessed on your writing. Unless you took a speech class, you probably weren't graded on your speaking – but you were certainly graded on your writing. And if your marks weren't high, you might still believe that you can't write well.

### Why is writing important?

Even with so much competition from television, movies, the Internet, mobile phones, and other communication media, the written word still carries weight.

At the time we wrote this book, Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* dominated the best-seller lists. As a novel, it's clearly a work of fiction. Yet, so many people took it at face value that the Catholic Church felt compelled to publicly state that it was fiction! This demonstrates the power of the written word (and, of course, the skill of Dan Brown to use it effectively).

We think writing is even *more* important than ever. The average person is bombarded with so much information clamouring for their attention that it's a tremendous advantage if you can put your words down in a clear and concise way.

Even in something as simple as an e-mail message, if you get your point across clearly and quickly, you can cut through the clutter to get and *keep* your reader's attention.

Even newer technology, such as e-mail and the World Wide Web, is based largely on the written word. So, despite all the graphics, photos, streaming audio and video, and other visual tools available, it's critical that your writing is clear.

### Who is this book for?

This book is for you if you have some area of expertise, and you would like to express that expertise in writing. In other words, it's about having a point and getting it across in writing.

This is not a book that teaches you how to write fiction – although many of the principles of fiction writing do overlap with non-fiction writing. Rather, we've written it to help you express your *ideas* clearly and persuasively.

Many people feel that the ability to produce beautiful writing is the result of a gift or an innate natural talent. That might be true for the great authors of history, but it's certainly not a requirement for getting a message across clearly and convincingly. You want effective, impressive, and even evocative writing, but you don't have to create the one-



in-a-million Pulitzer Prize winner. Good writing *can* be learned, and we're going to teach you how to write well.

In our opinion, *anyone* can learn to put their ideas in writing clearly and effectively. Whether you're writing a short article for a magazine, a booklet, an e-book or a full-length book, this book can help you.

### Who are we?

We, Gihan and Sam, are brother and sister, who were brought up from a young age to find the joy in books. Of course, that started with reading, and now we also both enjoy writing.

Sam is a high-school English teacher with years of experience helping high school students to write well – and to get assessed on their writing! In her teaching career, she has dealt with students with a range of writing abilities – from those who can hardly put a few words together to those who write fluently and naturally. As a result, she understands the *process* of writing, and how it differs for each person.

Gihan is a consultant, speaker and author who helps his clients to get more out of their existing products, services and ideas. He helps them to present their message more effectively on and off the Internet. He has already written a number of books and e-books, and coaches other business people to do the same in their business.



## What's in this book?

We have organised this book into six main sections.

In Part One, we look at ways of getting your ideas out of your head and on to the page. This helps you to get flowing with your writing, especially if you're not sure exactly where to begin.

Then, in Part Two, we'll show you how to arrange and organise your material to be persuasive and clear.

In Part Three, we describe a method for writing your material *fast* – even if you're not good at writing. In fact, you might choose to go here immediately if you're not confident about your writing skills.

Part Four looks at style and grammar. But don't worry – we're not going to take you back to school grammar lessons! Rather, in this section, we'll describe some simple things you can do to write with more impact and punch.

Finally, in the last two parts of the book, we look at writing for the Internet, one of the most important media in the twenty-first century. Part Five looks at the special requirements when writing for the World Wide Web, and Part Six addresses writing for e-mail.

## Part One: Getting Out Of Your Head

One of the most common questions we hear is, “What do I do when I face a blank sheet of paper or a blank computer screen?”

First, keep in mind that if you already have a topic in mind, you really don’t have a “blank sheet of paper”. You might not yet have the words in the right sequence, but you do have the *content* in your head.

Many people stumble at the first hurdle – they never get started. You might have so much swirling around in your mind that it’s not easy to put this all down on paper – let alone in a way that makes interesting reading.

In this part of the book, we’re going to show you some processes for getting those ideas out of your head and on to paper. In particular, we’ll talk about these processes:

- ⇒ Edward de Bono’s “Six Thinking Hats”, applied to writing;
- ⇒ The “Six Questions” that journalists use, applied to gathering ideas;
- ⇒ Tony Buzan’s “mind mapping”, applied to organising your ideas.

When Sam teaches this to her students, she calls it “warming up the brain”. In the same way that you warm up your muscles before doing physical exercise, these processes will

help you to warm up your brain for writing. You don't start exercising "cold," and you shouldn't start writing "cold".

Warming up your brain is extremely valuable. It gets you ready to write, and many ideas that you generate by these exercises will transfer directly to your final written product.

Warming up your brain also gets your mind focused on the topic. That's where you can suddenly get a spark of an idea that you might otherwise have missed. Thinking critically about your topic helps you connect the dots and develop a logical structure for what you want to write.

Keep in mind that the more you prepare, and the more detail you include in your preparation, the easier it will be to write. The words will flow much more easily later.

Before we get into the warming-up exercises, let's look at two important considerations before you start writing: Your environment and your expertise.

We'll also end this part of the book with some ideas for preparing material that influences your readers and persuades them to take action.

## Find the Write Time

Before we get into the processes themselves, consider the best environment for you to write.

The best time is an individual choice. Some people know that they work best first thing in the morning. Others say that they don't really get into their stride until the afternoon. Yet others do their best work when burning the midnight oil. Determine when you're most productive – the time when you're the most alert and energetic – because that's when *you* should be writing.

If you have other commitments on your time, you'll still need to create the best environment in which to write. You may not be writing at the peak of your energy, but you can at least create an atmosphere conducive to writing. Some people like writing with a lot of noise and hustle and bustle in the background; it's actually not a distraction for them, and it helps them feel comfortable. Other people prefer complete silence, so you need to be very careful that you find what works best for you.

Give yourself time to do your best writing. If possible, don't leave it until the last minute. You'll write with greater confidence, you'll be more relaxed, and your ideas will flow more freely.

If you have the luxury of time, put your writing aside and come back to it a day or two later. If you can leave an article or chapter alone for a few days and then come back to

what you've written, it's easier to face and you'll notice things you originally missed. You'll notice points you might want to change, revise, or even take out, and other points that you'd like to develop further.

Sam hates rereading anything she's written, but if she's left it for a while it's easier. She's reading with a fresh mind and a fresh viewpoint, and it's easier for her to be objective about it.

## Be an Expert

Readers who read non-fiction writing – whether in the form of articles or books – are looking for *information*. Whereas they might read fiction for the author's style, they read non-fiction for the author's expertise. So one of the most important things you can do before you start writing is to consider yourself an expert.

This might seem uncomfortable to you at first, especially if you know there are many other experts in your field. However, remember that you don't have to be *the* expert; rather, you are *an* expert on your topic area. The fact that you know more than your readers gives you expertise.

If this still feels uncomfortable, remember that your readers *expect* you to be an expert! After all, that's why they read your writing. If you're just the same as everybody else, your content is the same as everybody else's content, so there's nothing worth reading.

So even if you've never thought of yourself as an expert before, it's time to start thinking that way now!

### What makes you an expert?

Broadly speaking, experts fall into one (or more) of three categories:

⇒ They know something that other people don't know;

- ⇒ They have the same knowledge as others, but know how to *apply* that knowledge in a different way;
- ⇒ They know how to *teach* that knowledge – or the application of it – to others.

If you're in the first category, you're a *knowledge expert*. Typically, you have something new to share with the world – whether it's a new product, new management theory, a new twist on an old idea, or a new way of doing things. Some speakers, consultants and management gurus fall into this category. Readers read your writing because they're looking for something new.

In the second category, you're an *application expert*, who takes existing knowledge and applies it in a different way. Rather than creating new ideas, you might be teaching people how to apply existing ideas in their personal and business lives.

If you're the third type of expert – the *education expert* – you know how to transfer knowledge. The expertise you teach, and even the way it's applied, doesn't have to be unique, but you know how to teach it. Many trainers, consultants, coaches and facilitators fall into this category.

### Which type of expert are you?

Do you see yourself already in the categories above? Perhaps you fit more than one, or even all three. If you think you're not an expert in any of these areas, think again! You

probably *are* an expert, but you might not realise it because you take your expertise for granted.

For example, if you own a pet shop, you can write an article advising your customers on how best to use the products that you sell, which makes you an expert in their eyes. If you're a real estate agent, you're a knowledge expert (about the property market) *and* an application expert (you can show your vendor clients how to present their property for sale, and you can show your buyer clients how to select their ideal property). If you have a book shop, the information experts and the education experts are the authors of the books you sell, but you're the application expert who can advise readers on which books will best serve their reading preferences.

Whatever category you choose, realise that you *do* have expertise in that area, and start acting like an expert!

## The Six Thinking Hats

Sam uses Edward de Bono's "Six Thinking Hats"<sup>2</sup> with her students to get their brains warmed up.

The six "thinking hats" help you to think critically about your subject from different angles. Each hat represents a different way of looking at your subject:

- ⇒ Black hat: negative aspects
- ⇒ Yellow hat: positive aspects
- ⇒ Red hat: feelings and emotions
- ⇒ White hat: facts and simple observations
- ⇒ Green hat: creative ideas
- ⇒ Blue hat: decision making

By using all six hats, you develop the discipline to look at the topic from different viewpoints, attacking the idea from different angles. By looking at your topic from different perspectives you're getting past the mental block of a blank piece of paper.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward de Bono, *Six Thinking Hats*, Back Bay Books, 1999.

de Bono created the six hats process for all kinds of creative thinking. We're going to apply it specifically to help you get your ideas out of your head.

In this section, we'll first give you an overview of the six hats process. Then we'll describe some key principles in using the process. Finally, we'll work through an example of applying the process to a real topic.

### **White hat**

The white hat is used for facts and simple observations. What do you know for a fact? What research is available in this area? What do you know from your own experience?

If you're already an expert on your topic, start with the white hat. The ideas will flow easily, and you'll gain confidence for the rest of the process.

On the other hand, if you're not already an expert, or don't have enough facts and figures at hand, start with one of the other hats.

### **Black Hat**

When "wearing the black hat", look for all the negatives, disadvantages and drawbacks of your topic. What negative consequences could occur from actions? Who is worse off? What could go wrong?

Don't hold back, even if you know from your own expertise that the negatives can be turned into positives. This is your chance to play "devil's advocate" and take the opposing point of view.

Give yourself permission to look beyond your own opinions, and include negatives from critics, opponents, and others. Again, don't leave these out just because you disagree with them. List them here so that you can raise them and challenge them later in your writing.

### Yellow hat

The yellow hat is the opposite of the black hat. The yellow hat represents sunshine – where you look for positives, optimism, and benefits. What could go right? Who is better off? How does this make the world a better place? What are the benefits?

It often makes sense to work on this immediately after the black hat. If you've just finished working on negatives, you might have thought of positive aspects at the same time, so use the yellow hat to list them.

Don't restrict yourself to *proven* positives. Include your opinions, conjectures and ideas that come to mind, even if you don't have proof or strong backing for them.

## Red hat

The red hat is about emotions and feelings. How do you *feel* about this? What do other people feel? Who will get upset by this? Who will be happy?

Don't focus only your own feelings, but consider the feelings of others as well. The more you tap into their feelings in your writing, the more you engage them in their reading.

Write down all the possible emotional responses, even those that don't seem logical or rational. If you write the sentence, "Most people are frustrated..." you may immediately think, "Is it true that *most* people are frustrated?" Whether or not it's true, write it anyway. Later you can worry about accuracy and justifying these responses; now you're just thinking about feelings.

## Green hat

The green hat focuses on creative ideas. It's the "what if" hat, and it gets you thinking about possibilities. What would happen if you did this? What *e/se* would be affected outside your main topic area? What could this be combined with to create something new?

This is probably the most interesting hat, and in some ways it's the most difficult. It's also a hat you can put on and be quite silly. Even if you come up with thoughts that seem silly, fanciful, or a little like science fiction, that's okay – write them down anyway.

Your thoughts may lead you to an area that hasn't been explored yet, but could lead to a lot of potential for you. Don't censor yourself when you put on the green hat. Readers are looking to experts to show them something new, and they're looking for more than just facts. So enjoy wearing the green hat – it can be a lot of fun.

## Blue hat

The blue hat is the decision making hat. It's the director and the editor.

By the time you've completed the other five hats, you've probably noticed particular themes emerging across the hats or across a couple of the hats – and that's where your blue hat steps in and says, "*This* seems to be important" or, "*That* seems to be demanding attention". That might be the starting point or focus of your writing.

The blue hat also acts as a censor and moderator. Wearing your blue hat, review the output from the other five hats and look for things that are too outlandish, too contrary, too broad or just plain wrong. It doesn't mean that you should automatically discard these ideas; but consider them more carefully before you incorporate them into your writing.

## Key principles

We'll work through an example of using the six hats soon. As you do this, keep the following key principles in mind.

***Take your time***

This process can happen over time – even taking a number of days. If you're not working to a tight deadline, and you have the luxury of time, take as long as you like. Allow at least half an hour for each hat, and tackle the project over one or more days.

***Choose your sequence***

It doesn't matter which order you use when you work through the hats (Except that the blue hat comes last).

However, it *is* important to stick with one hat at a time. If you're working on positives (the yellow hat), and you think, "Yes, but..." that's a signal you want to censor your thoughts. Don't give in to the temptation. Return to the negative aspects when you're working on the black hat.

***Go deep if required***

When you think of an idea, you might write it as a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph or even more. Write as much – or as little – as you feel like writing.

If you feel the desire to write a lot about a particular idea, go for it. That means you have a lot to say, and if you feel compelled to let your words flow, then *let them flow*.

***Aim for quantity***

Aim to write between fifteen and thirty points under each hat. That may sound like a lot, but with practice, you'll find it's easy.

Don't just settle for five items. Don't say, "I've got five. That's enough. I'll move on to the next hat now". Keep tossing the idea around in your mind until you build a substantial list of points. In Sam's experience, it's not until you get to number ten or twelve that you really start to think of things that add excitement, freshness and originality to your writing. And you'll surprise yourself with the ideas you eventually find.

***Be original***

Continuing this point, remember that the first things that occur to you are the most obvious and are probably common knowledge.

If you push yourself to come up with fifteen or twenty thoughts, you've started thinking about areas that haven't been explored much – or at all. Those ideas may require more investigation on your part, but you'll be confident you're not just repeating something that someone else has already said.

That's especially important if you're considered an expert in your field. By generating a number of ideas under each hat, you develop depth and range in your topic.

There's certainly value summarising and collating existing ideas, but not as much value as saying, "Let's take this, this, and this, and here's something *new* that comes out of it".

Hollywood, for example, often makes this mistake. A successful Hollywood producer sometimes tries to copy their last successful movie, hoping to reproduce their success. But most movies are successful *because* they're new and different. Simply repeating the same formula rarely produces the same results.

### Example

Let's work through an example of using the six thinking hats. For our hypothetical example, let's suppose we're writing about procrastination. But to make it interesting, let's write about the *benefits* of procrastination.

We won't go through the entire process in detail, but we'll give you enough sample ideas from each hat to demonstrate how it works.

As you read through this example, keep in mind that this *is* an example, and we have invented some of the "facts"! Also, because it's an example, don't get caught up in the ideas we find for the topic. It's more useful to focus on the *process* we use.

#### **White hat (facts)**

- ⇒ Research shows that most people procrastinate.
- ⇒ Most leading time management authors say that procrastination is bad.
- ⇒ Richard Branson (or some other business leader) says that being decisive is one of the crucial factors in his success.

- ⇒ The Dalai Lama talks about the value of doing nothing.
- ⇒ Story of somebody who kept putting off buying a fire alarm, and eventually their house burned down.

***Black Hat (negatives)***

- ⇒ Procrastinating makes problems get worse.
- ⇒ When you procrastinate, you increase stress and pressure on yourself.
- ⇒ You cut corners and don't do a good enough job.
- ⇒ You might leave it too late and create a disaster.
- ⇒ "Don't just sit there; do something!"
- ⇒ It's too easy to procrastinate on important things.

***Yellow hat (positives)***

- ⇒ Sometimes the problem goes away!
- ⇒ If you're impulsive, procrastination can help.
- ⇒ Give yourself time to involve others.
- ⇒ Look at the big picture.
- ⇒ "Don't just do something; sit there!"
- ⇒ Parkinson's Law (work expands to fill time available). Because procrastination sometimes leads to *less* time available, it means you don't do wasteful work.

- ⇒ 80/20 Rule (20% of the work produces 80% of results). So if procrastination leads to a tight deadline, you're forced to do only the important things.
- ⇒ Better late than never.

### ***Red hat***

- ⇒ Most people feel bad about themselves when they put things off.
- ⇒ Other people get upset when we procrastinate – e.g. a mother who tells her child to clean their room.
- ⇒ Procrastination leads to stress.
- ⇒ Finally completing a job takes a weight off your mind.
- ⇒ Tight deadlines create tension in work and personal relationships.

### ***Green hat***

- ⇒ What is "positive procrastination?"
- ⇒ Can we create some rules for positive procrastination?
- ⇒ What's a more positive word for procrastination?
- ⇒ Adapt the Nike slogan "Just do it" to "Just do it ... later".
- ⇒ Adapt the Nike slogan "Just do it" to "Just don't do it".
- ⇒ The early bird gets the worm, but who wants to eat worms?
- ⇒ Instead of creating a "To Do" list, create a "Not To Do" list.

**Blue hat**

When we review what we've done with the other five hats, we notice two common themes:

- ⇒ Procrastination can give you more time to make better decisions.
- ⇒ Creating tight deadlines (by procrastinating) can focus our efforts on the most important things.

Either of these could form the basis for our article. Either way, the article takes a contrarian view to the popular attitude ("procrastination is bad"), which gives it an original twist. And we've also identified the opposing views, so that we can raise them, challenge them and rebut them in the article.

We strongly recommend that you apply this approach to your own writing. Start by choosing a topic you know well, and go through the six hats exercise. You'll be surprised by some of the things you will discover about your topic!

## Part Three: Write It Fast

If you've followed the exercises in the book with your own writing, you will have done this so far:

- ⇒ Extracted the ideas from your head;
- ⇒ Organised the material using a mind map;
- ⇒ Identified a clear purpose, audience and stance;
- ⇒ Chosen a structure for arranging the material.

Now it's time to start the writing process itself.

Instead of showing you how to write the material yourself, this part of the book shows you how to get most of the written material *without writing anything at all*.

Rather than writing it, you'll be *speaking* it, recording your words, and then getting those words transcribed into written form. We'll even show you how to find a writer to convert that transcript into its final form.

If you're not used to writing, this is by far the quickest way to create written material. The result won't be perfect, but it's easy to get it 80%, 90% or even 99% right. And then it doesn't take much to complete it.

This is not the way that the great writers in history wrote their masterpieces. And serious writers would probably turn up their nose at this approach. But that's because they are wordsmiths, whose writing – rightly – depends on nuances of style and structure.

Your job is different. Your main goal is to write clearly, concisely and persuasively about a topic within your expertise. So it's not as important to write in a compelling, unique style. Style *is* important, and we devote Part Four to that subject. But for now, let's focus on getting most of the words written.

### Overview of the process

Even though we say that it's faster to record your words than to write them, most people struggle when asked to speak into a microphone, even when there's no audience listening to them. In fact, the lack of an audience *inhibits* you, because you don't have the usual verbal and non-verbal feedback you get in normal conversation.

That's why we recommend that you record your material in an interview format, where you ask a friend or colleague to interview you on your topic.

But this isn't a hostile interview by an investigative journalist grilling you on a controversial topic. In fact, it's the exact opposite: You choose the questions, prepare your answers in advance, give the list to your interviewer, and sit down and have a conversation with them.

Once you have the recording of the interview, you can then get it transcribed (converted into printed form) and edited into its final form.

### Know your starting point

In the next few chapters, we're going to explain the interview process in more detail. Before we do, though, we'd like to emphasise the importance of doing all the preparatory work that we've already covered in this book.

You will find the interview much easier if you:

- ⇒ Know the *purpose* of your writing.
- ⇒ Understand the *audience* that you're writing for.
- ⇒ Identify the *stance* that you're going to take on the topic.
- ⇒ Choose the overall *structure* that you'll be following.

Even though this will be a recorded interview – so you can take as long as you like, and re-record any mistakes – it will still be so much more comfortable for you (and your interviewer!) if you have planned it in advance.

## Prepare the Questions

The first step in preparing for the interview is to write the questions. Do this *before* the interview, rather than relying on spur-of-the-moment ideas during the interview.

By preparing the questions in advance, you:

- ⇒ Choose questions that tie in with your area of expertise;
- ⇒ Cover the main areas you'd like to address about this topic;
- ⇒ Make the interviewer's job easier;
- ⇒ Allow the interview to flow more smoothly.

## Write your questions

Sometimes the questions will arise naturally from the material you have prepared already, the stance you're planning to take, and the structure you plan to use.

If you're looking for a broad framework for organising your questions, follow this formula: Who, Why, What, How, What If (This is similar to the 4MAT System we covered earlier).

Let's consider some of the questions that you might ask in each area.

**Who**

These questions introduce you to the listeners and establish your credibility – for example:

- ⇒ How did you get started in this area?
- ⇒ What sort of clients do you typically deal with?
- ⇒ How long have you been working with these issues?
- ⇒ Why are you qualified to write about this topic?

This part of the interview often ends up in the introduction of your book or article.

**Why**

These questions motivate the readers by describing the problem and the benefits of solving it – for example:

- ⇒ In your experience, why are most people so bad at [*customer service, time management, etc.*]?
- ⇒ The latest research shows that most employees are still unhappy with their jobs, even in the best companies. Why are most companies getting it wrong?
- ⇒ Why is it important to use a formal strategic planning process?

**What**

These questions give an overview of the solution – for example:

- ⇒ What is the single most important principle in *[goal setting, leadership, etc.]*?
- ⇒ What are the keys to success in *[your topic area]*?
- ⇒ You say that procrastination can sometimes be a *good* thing. What do you mean by that?

**How**

Now you get into the details by describing the solution in more depth – for example:

- ⇒ So let's go through each of those steps in detail ...
- ⇒ What simple things can somebody do right away to address this issue?
- ⇒ If you're not sure what to do next, how do you get started?
- ⇒ What are the typical things that could get in the way of implementing this process?

**What If**

These questions help the readers to project the solution into the future – for example:

- ⇒ What sort of results can a typical organisation expect if they put your seven-step process into practice?
- ⇒ What organisations are already doing this well?

- ⇒ How quickly can we expect results?
- ⇒ What should we be looking for to measure the success of this process?

Although it might seem a bit artificial to write your questions in this sequence, you will find that it's a natural progression that makes your interview flow easily.

### Ask your readers

Another powerful way to find questions for your interview is to *ask your readers*. If you have a way to reach your readers before you write your material, use it to ask them for their questions.

For example:

- ⇒ If you're a professional speaker or trainer, ask audiences at your presentations.
- ⇒ If you publish an e-mail newsletter, ask your subscribers.
- ⇒ Ask other people to ask *their* clients, audiences and subscribers
- ⇒ If you operate a retail shop, ask your customers as they enter or leave the shop.

You will get the best results if you ask an open-ended question, like this:

"What is the single biggest question / problem / worry / concern / issue / challenge you have about *[the interview topic]*?"

For example, when creating the product *Low Cost Promotion*<sup>12</sup>, I (Gihan) sent a message to my e-mail newsletter list, saying:

Next week, Candy Tymson and I are recording a new program about low-cost and no-cost promotion, both on and off the Internet. Please help us to make this program as useful as possible by telling us your biggest questions about promoting your business. It could be about whatever you like - newspaper advertising, TV, radio, search engines, newsletters, whatever.

Take these questions, discard any that aren't appropriate, and add the others to your list.

One of the biggest benefits of this process – apart from getting real questions that people would like answered – is that many of the questions will be based around real-life scenarios, stories and examples. These make your interview – and hence your writing – more interesting.

### Review the questions

At the end of this process, you will have a reasonable list of questions to give to the interviewer.

Now review the list:

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<sup>12</sup> Available from [www.GihanPerera.com](http://www.GihanPerera.com).

- ⇒ Remove questions that are too specific, narrow or on a tangent (These usually come from your survey). But use your judgment here. Sometimes a question that looks very specific actually has an answer that applies to a much wider audience.
- ⇒ Take questions that are too broad and narrow them down. For example, instead of “How do you deliver great customer service?”, you might ask “What is the single most important first step for improving your customer service?”
- ⇒ Highlight the essential questions, and keep the others on hand as options if the opportunity arises. It’s better to have too many questions rather than too few, because it’s much easier to leave out material if there’s too much than to add material if there’s not enough.

Finally, look back at your purpose and audience, and make sure that your questions do cover all the material that you require for your writing.

## Record the Interview

You don't require a professional studio to record the interview. For the purpose of capturing the information for transcription, even a simple cassette recorder is sufficient for the job, as long as you've got a quiet setting.

I (Gihan) use a digital voice recorder – the JNC SSF-22 (JNC is the brand, and SSF-22 is the model) – for my recordings. It costs about \$250 and is available at electronics stores and major department stores. This recorder uses AAA batteries, which makes it easy to use without a special charger or any other attachments.

You can sit it on a table between you and your interviewer, speak in a normal voice, and it will record just fine.

## Conduct the interview

Now comes the interview process itself. This might be a bit daunting at first – both for you and the interviewer – but remember that you're doing this purely for the purpose of getting it transcribed later. So you can take as long as you like, and stop and start as often as you like.

Print two copies of the questions, one for yourself and one for the interviewer.

Start the recorder and record some of your conversation, and then play it back to make sure it's working and that it plays back clearly. Make sure that you hear *both* people clearly. Your voice is more important than your interviewer's voice, because you'll be doing most of the talking. But it's handy to have their voice as well, so that you get the questions transcribed as well – you might be able to work them into your writing.

Then start the interview, which is essentially just a process of the interviewer asking the questions and you answering them.

While conducting the interview, pretend that you're talking to the interviewer in a casual conversation. Just keep it conversational, and you'll come across just fine. That said, don't worry if you pause, stumble or sound artificial. The *sound* of your voice doesn't matter, because it won't make a difference to the transcript.

Take frequent breaks during the interview. This gives you a chance to relax and gather your thoughts, and also allows you to check the recording from time to time. If there's a problem with the recording (for example, flat batteries or you run out of tape), it's better to know that early, so that you only have to re-record a small part of the interview!

## The Last Word

We've come to the end of this book, and the end of our time together. However, we hope that it's only the beginning of *your* journey in putting your thoughts into writing.

If we can leave you with one key idea to take away, we think the best thing for any writer is to *enjoy* the writing. That doesn't mean that you must enjoy having to sit down and sweat blood to get things in writing! We've given you plenty of tools and techniques to get past that point anyway.

Rather, the enjoyment comes from really wanting to share your ideas with someone. If you can keep that at the forefront of what you're doing, it will be a motivating factor to do it when you hit an obstacle.

Even when you're writing with a profit motive in mind – for example, writing a persuasive Web page sales letter or writing a paid article for a magazine – don't make the profit an end in itself. Write because you have something worthwhile to share, and the writing is your way of sharing the idea.

We wish you all the best in your writing.



## About Gihan Perera

Gihan Perera is a business consultant, speaker, author and entrepreneur – with clients throughout Australia, and in New Zealand, South Africa, Singapore, the U.K. and Canada. He works with professional speakers and trainers, consultants, business owners, CEOs and strategic leadership teams to improve their marketing, sales and persuasion skills in one-on-one meetings, group presentations and on the Internet.

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