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EFFECTIVE WRITING IN ENGLISH  
*A Sourcebook*

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Mike Hannay  
J. Lachlan Mackenzie

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## **Effective Writing in English**



# Effective Writing in English

## A Sourcebook

Mike Hannay

J. Lachlan Mackenzie

Third, revised edition

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coutinho

bussum 2017

[www.coutinho.nl/effectivewritingenglish](http://www.coutinho.nl/effectivewritingenglish)

This book has a companion website. The online study material consists of spelling guidelines as well as exercises on a number of chapters of the book and a key to those exercises.

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## Foreword to the third edition

We learn to speak and understand our native language without any great effort, for these are natural aspects of the maturation of every human being. The skills of reading and writing, by contrast, have to be learned, usually in an educational context. Now, when it comes to a foreign language, all the skills (speaking, understanding, reading and writing) have to be learned. Nothing can be acquired without considerable effort. This learning process does not take place in a vacuum: it is heavily influenced by our previous experience of acquiring our native language and learning to read and write it. These facts have been taken as the background to this book. It is aimed at native speakers of Dutch who have learned to read and write their own language and who now wish to add skill in writing English to their repertoire. These may be students specializing in English studies, or students whose courses include an English skills component. Alternatively, the book will be useful for Dutch-speaking research students who have to report on their findings in English. Since these are our well-defined target groups, we will be continually pointing to those aspects of written English which differ from comparable aspects of written Dutch, while also giving a complete guide to the writing process.

This book follows on from the introductory material offered in Manon van der Laaken, Robert E. Lankamp & Michael Sharwood Smith (2001), *Writing better English: A multi-purpose model for advanced speakers*. Our book focuses on the correctness and appropriateness of the written English you produce (the quality of the product) and consequently can be seen as complementary to Janene van Loon, Arnoud Thüss, Nicole Schmidt & Kevin Haines (2016), *Academic writing in English: A process-based approach*, second edition, which leads you through the various processes of writing. We will be making regular reference to grammatical notions in this book, and *Effective Writing in English* can be used in conjunction with J. Lachlan Mackenzie (2014), *Principles and Pitfalls of English Grammar*, third revised edition. All these books are also published by Uitgeverij Coutinho.

This is the third edition of a book that first saw the light of day in 1996. The book is now more streamlined and reader-friendly than it used to be. Parts 1 and 2 have been rather thoroughly rewritten, with several new examples; Parts 3 and 4 have also been updated, as have the Suggestions for further reading. The guidance on spelling has been moved to the companion website, [www.coutinho.nl/effectivewritingenglish](http://www.coutinho.nl/effectivewritingenglish), where you will find the

spelling guidelines as well as exercises on a number of chapters of the book and a key to those exercises.

We wish to acknowledge the help and counsel of numerous friends and colleagues whose input has been invaluable over the years. A few of these deserve special mention. Prof. Herman Wekker of the University of Groningen (1943-1997) oversaw the entire genesis of this book in its original form, offering us wise and authoritative advice on a wide range of subjects. Prof. Walter Nash (1926-2015), of Nottingham University, was a source of constant inspiration to us both throughout our work on writing in English. Prof. Roderick Lyall, Emeritus Professor of Literatures in English at VU University, added valuable comment on the whole manuscript and Emeritus Professor Richard Todd, of the University of Leiden, kindly made available to us his style guide for literary essays, which we have adapted for part of Chapter 14. Reinder Elzenga's and Dr Joy Burrough-Boenisch's insightful comments on the earlier form of the book have influenced our book for the better. We learned enormously from Prof. Dirk Siepmann and Dr John Gallagher while collaborating on *Writing in English: A guide for advanced learners* (Francke Verlag, Tübingen & Basle, 2011). And last but not least, our lasting gratitude goes to the thousands of students – now anonymous – whose work we have read, enjoyed and corrected over the years and whose thoughts have found their way into many of our examples.

Mike Hannay, Amstelveen  
Lachlan Mackenzie, Amsterdam  
May 2017

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# Introduction

One of the most obvious characteristics of our contemporary world is that the written word is everywhere. A greater number of people than ever before are being confronted in their daily activities with other people's writings and by the need to produce writing themselves, privately and above all professionally. What is more, as the internationalization of our world continues to gather pace, so we are also increasingly being faced with the tasks of reading and producing texts in other languages than our own. In this respect, the dominant role of English as the language of global communication makes it essential that skill in writing English should be part of the stock-in-trade of all educated people.

The English language is amazingly flexible, continually adapting itself to the various communicative needs of the people that use it in the situations in which it is being used. The form that we will discuss in this book is the argued text: by this we mean a text which both presents information and takes a stand on that information. The argued text is employed in a wide range of situations: in report-writing and in the production of academic articles, in many forms of reflective journalism, e.g. editorials, in serious blogs, and in historical and biographical work. As a norm for learning and practice purposes, we will be assuming the 1,000-word text. This, in our view, is the minimum length for a text to contain an adequate introduction, a sufficient coverage of arguments, and a well-supported conclusion.

We recognize, of course, that there are many other forms of prose than the argued text. Narrative texts, for example, differ in being built around the chronological sequence of real or imagined events, while descriptive texts have their structure dictated, at least to some extent, by the nature of the object or scene being described. Less formal texts, such as private letters, diary entries or e-mails, not to mention posts on social media, will have a less rigorous construction than argued texts, more incomplete sentences and generally will stand closer to what is typical of spoken language. Nevertheless, we feel that a mastery of the argued text is fundamental to overall competence in writing, since the principles of organization found in argued texts (notably the tripartition into introduction–body–conclusion and the division of texts into internally coherent paragraphs) return, relaxed to various degrees, in other text types. In particular, we are convinced that gaining experience in writing argued texts on subjects that you are reasonably familiar with and have an opinion about is the best preparation for writing academic texts of various kinds.

The aim of this book is to offer you not only practical advice on writing skills but also an understanding of the reasons behind that advice. Only in this way, we feel, will you achieve control over your writing. Our goal is to make you aware of the various options that are at your disposal, and what the consequences are of the selections that you make. We will also be at pains to make you aware of the pitfalls that threaten every native speaker of Dutch who wishes to write accurate and effective English.

The overall structure of the book is from macro to micro. Matters dealt with in broad brushstrokes in early parts of the book come back in later parts, with an increasing focus on detail. Part 1 offers a first look at the challenges of writing, taking you through the phases of planning, writing proper and editing. Part 2 is concerned with the three major sections of any argued text, the introduction, the body and the conclusion, and also gives advice on how to come up with an appealing title. Part 3 deals with how to construct effective sentences, showing how important it is for successful writers to have a large range of grammatical options at their disposal, to be able to deploy various textual devices and – last but not least – to be proficient in punctuation. Part 4 is full of immediately applicable advice on ‘getting the details right’, giving clear but not dogmatic guidance on writing accurate and communicatively appropriate English. Among the many issues treated here are how to use connectives (words like *however* and *consequently*), how to express opinions in argued prose, and how to refer to other texts. Part 4, and the book, concludes with Chapter 15, a checklist for revising. This chapter can also be used by composition teachers for correcting and marking written work.

Our book contains hundreds of examples, many of them taken from texts written by our students. Not all of these deserve to be imitated: those that are ungrammatical are preceded by a cross (✕) and those that are not fully acceptable by a question mark (?); in addition, those that are grammatical but in some way unsuitable in the context have been marked by a triangle (△). Note, however, that we only use these symbols to mark specific aspects of language and use which are relevant to the subject being discussed in the text. Where example sentences include student errors that do not relate to the topic of discussion, we have not marked the sentence in any way; in other words we have let the mistake stand rather than correcting it.

The advice that we offer is based on an analysis that we have made of an extensive corpus of essays written by students at VU University Amsterdam and by participants in courses given there. That analysis has revealed not only that inexperienced Dutch writers of English are liable to commit errors of various predictable types but also that they make less use of certain forms of expression which are regularly found in the writing of native speakers of English. This book aims both to eradicate errors and to draw attention to underused constructions. From time to time in the book, we suggest that you should not do X, but do Y instead. In advising inexperienced writers, how-

ever, it is difficult to make hard and fast rules, since there may well be good communicative reasons in a particular context for you to do X after all. It is not our intention to stultify your creativity; we invite you to understand our prescriptions as well-meant advice rather than as dictates.

## Website

This book has a companion website with extra study material, which you can access at [www.coutinho.nl/effectivewritingenglish](http://www.coutinho.nl/effectivewritingenglish). The online study material consists of:

- spelling guidelines;
- exercises on a number of chapters of the book and a key to those exercises.



# **Part 1**

## **The process of writing**

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**1 Preliminaries**

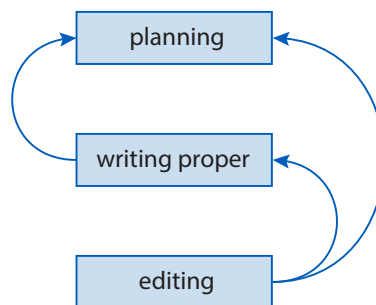
**2 Editing**

## The process of writing

The word ‘writing’ will be used in this book in a broad sense. It will cover not just the actual production of written text (what we call ‘writing proper’) but also those processes that precede and follow the process of writing proper. The three processes that we distinguish are:

- planning
- writing proper
- editing

In general terms, planning must precede writing proper: you cannot start to produce text without having thought about what you are going to write about. Similarly, editing must follow writing proper: since editing involves reading your own work critically and making changes where appropriate, there must be a text there to be read and adapted. Nevertheless, recent research has shown that skilled writers allow the three stages to overlap in time. As you write down your ideas, you might notice that certain elements of your original plan no longer seem appropriate and need to be revised. Moreover, new ideas keep cropping up as you write, and their relevance to the overall plan needs to be assessed. So planning and writing proper inevitably overlap. Much the same can be said about writing proper and editing. As a writer, you are simultaneously a reader (of your own writing): skilled writers are often able to write and edit more or less at the same time. Editing may even overlap with planning. In the self-critical process of editing, you may decide that reformulation is not enough and that the entire plan with which you started out has to be amended, which in turn will cause you to rewrite lengthy sections of your work. The processes of planning, writing proper, and editing can thus be seen as cyclical rather than simply consecutive in time (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1*

The two chapters in this part will deal with the three processes in turn. Chapter 1 will introduce you to planning and writing proper. You will learn how to ensure that your work is entirely original while referring to existing publications. You will also find suggestions for building up an argument in which your standpoint and your persuasive intention come across clearly while keeping the text attractive and coherent for your readers. Chapter 1 also contains hints for achieving the ‘depersonalization’ that is appropriate for argued discourse; about the restrictions on using incomplete sentences, questions, and exclamations; and about how to compensate for the absence in English of various Dutch techniques for giving emphasis. Chapter 2 deals with the essential process of editing, suggesting three different levels at which your text can be improved and briefly discussing some aspects of word processing programs that are relevant to the editing process.



# 1

## Preliminaries

### 1.1 Planning your text

Written language appears in many forms. The form we will focus on in this book is the *argued text*. By this we mean a text which both presents information and takes a stand on that information. Argued text is used in a wide range of situations in daily working life: in written reports, academic articles, opinion pieces such as newspaper editorials, blogs, and also in historical and biographical work. Argued texts also form an important part of the learning experience in tertiary education, and as a norm for this particular purpose we will be assuming the 1,000-word text. In our view, this is the minimum length for a text to contain an adequate introduction, a sufficient coverage of arguments, and a well-supported conclusion.

An argued text is a product of reflection: you will need to reflect on what you wish to communicate and how you wish to communicate, both before you start writing and during the writing process. Thinking about what to write about is generally referred to as *planning* and is recognized as an essential aspect of communicating in writing. Since you will be writing in English, you should conduct these planning activities as much as possible in that language. This way you will only develop ideas that you have the capacity to express in English. An important implication of writing in English, now the leading international language, is that you are potentially communicating with a worldwide readership whose needs have to be considered. More specifically, for the kind of argued text you will be creating, you should assume that your readers are educated adults from anywhere in the world, who have good general knowledge but are not necessarily specialists in the field that you are writing about. You should therefore not only avoid references to specific aspects of your native culture but also not assume that the reader will be familiar with purely British or exclusively American cultural phenomena.

Many inexperienced writers fear that they will not have enough ideas for a text of the length required. There is so much information available in today's world, but how can you come up with original ideas for your argued text? There is no easy answer to this question, but we strongly recommend *brainstorming* as a way of overcoming 'writer's block'. Discuss your topic with as

many different people as possible, again preferably in English, face-to-face or online. You'll probably find that this interactive approach will help you to formulate your ideas, and the reactions of the people you are brainstorming with will give you a good impression of what your future readership is likely to think of your ideas.

Your subject matter will be determined by the nature of the task at hand, be it a review of the literature, a report on an experiment, a proposal for research, or whatever. An important characteristic of any kind of argued text, however, is that the writer will regularly take a stand on work that has already been published. This is entirely legitimate and indeed it will be expected of you, but it is essential that you always acknowledge the source of all the information that you use, either by *quoting* it (using quotation marks) or by *paraphrasing* it (i.e. restating it in your words). In all cases, even when you are paraphrasing, you must specify the source very precisely. All the sources you use will ultimately find their way into your footnotes or bibliography. In Chapter 14, we will explain in detail how these sources are documented for two specific disciplines – linguistics and literary studies. If you are working in another discipline, you should find out what system is prevalent in that discipline, since it may differ from either of these in various respects. Whatever documentation system you choose or are required to use, you should already be applying it during this planning stage. You don't want to be hunting for references when the deadline for submission is approaching!

In the academic world, only works that have been subjected to *peer review* are acceptable as sources. Peer review means that a publication has been verified by anonymous experts in the field and selected as reliable by a recognized professional editor. All the books and journals in the university library have undergone this process. Today, however, almost all students, as well as senior academics, turn to the Internet rather than the library for their information, since most peer-reviewed publications are now online. However, not all the material on the Internet is reliable: many of the web pages suggested by your browser are not peer-reviewed and many pages have a short life on the net. Notice in particular that Wikipedia, like all anonymous sites, is not an acceptable source for academic writing. Although it contains a wealth of correct information, it is open to abuse since it allows anyone to edit articles. If you learn something relevant on Wikipedia, find a peer-reviewed source for the same information before adding it to your work.

In addition, the sense of anonymity associated with the Internet may lead you to commit *plagiarism*. This is the illicit and indeed illegal practice of presenting other people's written work as though it were the writer's own (see Chapter 14 Section 2 for further discussion). If you copy and paste someone else's text into your own, that is blatant intellectual theft. But even if you only fail to specify the sources of the information and ideas in your argued text, that is enough to make you equally guilty of plagiarism. A lot of plagiarism

comes from writer insecurity and/or a lack of experience with the production of argued text. Using someone else's material may at times seem like a tempting shortcut, but you should never forget that writing is an opportunity to express your own ideas while properly acknowledging the work of others; and this is also what your readers will expect of you.

Once you have generated enough ideas for the argument you wish to make, it will be important to decide what is truly essential and what can be dispensed with. This is the process of *selection* and involves evaluating the relative effectiveness of the various items of information that you could potentially include. Even though certain details may have taken a lot of effort to develop, what ultimately counts is whether they are fully relevant to your argument. There is a natural resistance to jettisoning the results of hard work, but if you conclude that it is really not appropriate or effective, then out it must go.

Now you have a good idea of what the text will be about, the next step is to take a *perspective* on the matter at hand. This will have a profound effect on the nature of your text and the direction of your argument. For example, in the case of an argued text that takes the form of a literature review in which you summarize various articles on some subject, you will have to decide what perspective you are going to adopt. This involves questions like: (a) should I try and retrace the chronology of ideas, attempting to reconstruct how authors have influenced each other? (b) should I aim to give an objective report or should I incorporate an element of evaluation, indicating my opinions about the work I am reviewing? (c) should I perhaps only select literature that reflects my own thinking? Whatever you decide, bear in mind that your readers will expect you to have a viewpoint, since this will be the motor behind your argument.

While your perspective indicates where you are coming from, you also need to think forwards and determine what you want your text to achieve. This process of determining your *intention* will add dynamics and purposefulness to your text. It involves working out such matters as (a) whether you wish to present only one side of an argument or both sides; (b) whether you need to present examples or can achieve your aims with argumentation alone; (c) whether you want to persuade the reader or merely describe what you are dealing with; (d) whether you will be expressing your emotions about a particular situation; or (e) whether you wish to suggest some remedies for some deplorable state of affairs. As you can appreciate, the answers to these types of questions will have a great impact on your text as a whole.

All the prior reflection about your assignment (brainstorming, researching, note-taking, selection, deselection, taking a perspective, determining an intention) at some point gives way to actually formulating your argued text, what we call the writing proper. The preparatory work has been 'for your eyes only'. Now you are moving on to communicating with your reader, whoever

they may be: your tutor, possibly, but in principle it could be anyone who can read English. It is therefore essential that your text is *reader-friendly*, i.e. adapted to the needs of the expected reader. This has implications for every single aspect of your text: its overall structure (which must conform to the reader's expectations), the coherence of your argument (which must be clear to all readers), and the grammaticality of your sentences (which must not distract readers from their task of understanding your message).

We strongly recommend that you do not start on the writing proper of your 1,000-word text before you have a framework in your mind. You have to know what will be going into the introduction, how the body of the text is going to develop, and what you are planning to put in the conclusion. Many novices start writing without a clear idea of where they wish to end up, hoping that a good conclusion will occur to them when they have completed the other parts of the text. However, the result of this hopeful strategy is very often that the conclusion, which is after all the most important part of the entire text, either offers an anticlimactic repetition of ideas from the body of the text or goes off in some direction that is not predicted by the introduction. Good overall planning will guarantee the *coherence* of the overall argument. This is so essential that Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will be devoted to ensuring that the title, introduction, body, and conclusion of your argued text form a unified whole that will be satisfying to your reader (whether or not they agree with your argument).

Once you have your overall plan in place, should you then write your text in the order in which it will be read? Many writers find it self-evident that you should indeed do so, but there is in fact no particularly good reason for this. One option you should certainly consider is to postpone the actual formulation of the introduction until you are sure of what the body and the conclusion will contain; in certain cases, it is even advisable to wait until the entire remainder of the text has been written (in pre-final form). The thinking behind this option is that an introduction is always an *introduction to something*: you can never be sure exactly what to include and exactly what to omit from the introduction until you know what you are introducing the reader to. Many introductions are communicatively unsuccessful for this very reason: as textual units in themselves they may be perfectly adequate, but as textual units which serve to prepare the reader for what is to follow, they fail. Similarly, if you already know what your conclusion is going to be, why not go ahead and write it? The body of the text can then be tailored to that goal. Hence the rule of thumb:

**PLAN** your introduction, then your conclusion, and then your body  
*but*

**WRITE** your body, then your conclusion, and then your introduction