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Becoming a Master How-To Writer

It's easy to be a mediocre how-to writer. And while becoming a good or even great how-to writer isn't brain surgery, it does require practice, persistence, dedication, and mastery of a few principles most writers seem unaware of.

Levels of the game

The most basic mistake made by even experienced writers who turn their hand to how-to and self-help writing is telling readers "what to do" instead of showing them "how to do it."

My friend Dr. Jeffrey Lant gives the example of a book on small business marketing that told the reader to "try advertising on matchbook covers." That's "what to do" writing.

At the next level up, said Jeffrey, you should tell the reader *how* to do advertising on matchbooks. How many words of copy can you fit? What does it cost per thousand matchbooks? Who do you call to place your ad? What products are appropriate to advertise on matchbook covers?

At the highest level is *doing it for them*. In this case, the book could have supplied templates for sample matchbook ads the reader could adapt to his own business.

The lazy writers out there think they are writing how-to, but are really writing mostly what-to-do.

Experienced how-to writers strive to write clear instructions with sufficient details to enable the reader to perform the function or complete the task. You should do the same. If you can figure out a way to get to the highest level and do some or all of the work for your readers, they will love you for it.

A good example is Brownstone Publishing, which publishes paid subscription newsletters on legal issues for laypeople in various fields (schools, building management). Its articles don't just tell subscribers what to include in contracts. They provide boilerplate clauses the reader can drop into actual contracts!

Table 5.1 shows the hierarchy of instructional writing: what to do; how to do it; doing it for them. The lower you scroll down the table, the more satisfied your readers will be.

Table 5.1. Levels of How-To Writing

Level	Where Found
Why to do it	Motivational talks
What to do	Magazine articles
How to do it	Books, e-books, seminars, workshops
Do it for them	Online tools, templates, model forms, software

The 7 most common how-to writing mistakes and how to avoid them

One way to become a good how-to writer is to learn what not to do in your writing. In my role as a small online publisher, I frequently hire ghostwriters to write e-books for me. Though these are all professional writers, the quality of the writing ranges from good to downright abysmal. Here are the seven most common mistakes the writers I hire make when writing how-to e-books for me:

Mistake #1: Laziness

Many writers are just plain lazy. They don't want to do the hard work of researching their topic, so they fake it. As a result, the readers don't get the information they want or need, and they become frustrated. For instance, here's a paragraph one of my writers submitted to me in a draft of an e-book I hired her to write:

How much does printing postcards cost? Unfortunately, there's no good answer to this question. Depending on whether you use full color, black and white, black and white on colored paper, bleeds, die-cuts, odd-shaped postcards, how many you order and any number of other variables, you can spend anywhere from 5¢ per postcard to a dollar or more.

What's wrong with her copy is that there is a good answer to this question of what postcards cost to print. It's the writer's job to find it and present it to the reader. I told the writer to visit the websites of companies specializing in postcard marketing; their pricing schedules are listed right on the sites.

Mistake #2: Visit this site/Google it

The next draft was better. Instead of saying there's no answer to the question "What do postcards cost to print?", the writer gave the URLs of three websites of companies that specialize in postcard printing and told the reader to Google "postcard printers" for more.

That's fine, except the reader has paid us for a book that is supposed to give the information, not refer him to the internet for it. If he has to look at these sites for prices and then Google to find more price information, he is in essence doing the writer's job.

It's okay to suggest websites or Googling, but only after you have presented the information the reader needs. I would have given a summary of average printing costs for various postcard sizes and paper stocks instead of making the reader look for it.

Mistake #3: Logical contradictions

A logical contradiction is a statement that logically cannot be true. Here is an example from a manuscript one of my writers handed in to me:

By having a product on the internet, you have no overhead to worry about. All you have to do is have the product available for fast download for the customer. By watching your overhead, you can increase your profit margins. Also watching your overhead can influence product pricing.

Can you spot the logical contradiction? In the first sentence, he says internet businesses have no overhead. In the third sentence, he talks about watching “your overhead.” If I have no overhead, what am I watching?

Mistake #4: Rambling

Here is an excerpt from a draft that same writer wrote for me for a book on measuring web metrics:

Many people seem to overlook this function of metrics. Or at least they don't pay much attention to it. When people come to your website, they perform actions which can be in the form of communications. These communications can be email, forms, video, chat, or whatever mechanism is in place to allow for such communication. By understanding the function of communications in metrics, it will force each webmaster or online business owner to pay more attention to this facet of their data collecting and measuring. For example, when someone clicks on an email link, fills out a form, or clicks to view a video, each one of these steps is a form of communication that webmasters should measure. This way they will know what actions their visitors take when visiting their website.

It takes 135 words and basically says, “Web metrics are important and should be measured.” Given that the reader has shelled out \$29 for an e-book on web metrics, it’s safe to assume he already thinks it’s important. Therefore, this paragraph adds no new information or value and just takes up space. It’s rambling and has no point or purpose.

Mistake #5: Not realizing that words have meaning

It frustrates me when professional writers I hire hand in e-book copy like this:

Your client owes you money. He/she has not responded to your calls or emails. You must assume at this point that something is wrong. Here's what I suggest. Find out why they are not responding to your calls or emails. You need to collect on the money that they owe.

Your client did sign off on your work, agreeing to pay you. And, the company still owes you money. Importantly, this client may have

done work for you in the past, and you want to perform more work with them in the future. Don't lose your client by being too aggressive, nasty, or rude. You must somehow reach them in a manner that will make everyone happy.

Every sentence is weak. “You need to collect on the money that they owe.” Duh! “This client may have done work for you in the past.” Wrong: You performed work for them. “You must somehow reach them in a manner that will make everyone happy.” That’s *what* to do, which is embarrassingly obvious. What the writer needs to tell us is *how* to reach them to collect the debt without offending anyone.

Mistake #6: Writing that says nothing

It’s hard to believe, but the sample below was also submitted by a professional writer. It’s an article for a chemistry website I have on careers in chemistry:

In order to consider a career in chemistry, you will need to study. Start with a major in chemistry. After this, depending on the career path you've chosen, you can move on to other courses. These will depend entirely on the job you want.

Becoming a chemist isn't for everyone. However, if you are particularly fond of atoms, then this could be for you.

In the first paragraph, we are told that to have a career in chemistry, we need to study chemistry. Wow, that’s a helpful tip! And then after that, the courses we take should depend on what job we want. There’s an original concept!

The second paragraph reads like a joke, except the writer was serious: A career in chemistry is for people who are “fond of atoms”? How someone can write this, submit it to me with a straight face, and expect to be paid is beyond me. Of course I made him rewrite it.

Here is the lead of an article I clipped from my local penny-saver newspaper. Why am I showing it to you? It’s not a how-to piece, but it caught my attention because of its clean, simple, straightforward style:

During a Sept. 16 meeting, the Rochelle Park Township Committee issued a strong warning to owners who neglect their properties: Clean up or face a hefty fine.

Mayor Frank Valenzuela said that properties are being left unattended throughout the township due to foreclosures, estate sales, etc. These property owners will now have to pay maintenance charges accrued by the Department of Public Works.

“We’re serious about this,” said Valenzuela. “Any property that’s in limbo and not being kept up is a quality-of-life issue.”

Notice how the piece flows smoothly and pulls the reader along in the story. I especially like the colon separating the two parts of the sentence in the first paragraph, which seems to propel the reader forward. Compare this bold, confident, competent writing with the weak, rambling drafts submitted to me in the five examples above.

Mistake #7: Running out of steam

Too many authors start off with great enthusiasm and write great introductions and opening chapters, only to gradually lose steam as they write, becoming lazier with each subsequent chapter.

I often get e-book manuscripts from writers where the initial chapters average ten pages each, but by the time we get to the middle and closing chapters, some chapters are literally a page or even half a page. This is a clear indication to me that the author is getting tired or running out of steam, and he is cheating the reader by delivering increasingly inferior and superficial chapters the further he gets.

Yes, to get and hold the reader’s attention, the introduction and first chapter must be great. But that doesn’t mean the rest of the book can be mediocre. The trick is to start on a high level and stay there.

While it’s not mandatory, it’s a good idea to have chapters that are similar in length and density. Having Chapter 3 be 50 pages and Chapter 15 be three pages is a sign of author fatigue. The solution? Either beef up Chapter 15 with more content or divide Chapter 3 into two or more smaller chapters so the chapter lengths throughout the book are more equal.

Note: Of the mistakes listed here, the last sin is the least egregious, and I have been known to make it myself from time to time. Still, it is better to avoid it if you can.

Matters of voice

By “voice” in how-to writing, we mean the writer’s expertise in the topic matter and status in the field in relationship to the student’s knowledge and position.

“To be a powerful and effective communicator, whether in print, on the platform, on TV or radio, you need to communicate in your own special voice,” said Ted Nicholas in *The Success Margin*. Nicholas defined “voice” as “nothing less than the sum total of your words, expressions, personality, and mannerisms that make you—you.”

As my colleague Nick Osborne points out, there are three basic voices you can take:

1. *The first voice is the “experienced expert.”* If you have been in the field a long time, have a lot of experience, and are highly educated in the subject, your voice is that of a top expert patiently teaching others his craft or topic. This is the voice I use when writing about marketing and copywriting, which I have done all of my professional life—for more than four decades. You can find it on my main website, www.bly.com, especially on the Articles page. Other examples of the experienced expert include Larry MacMillan on options trading, Suze Orman on personal finance, and James Lange on retirement and estate planning.
2. *The second voice is the knowledgeable participant.* This is the voice to use when you have not spent your life learning the field, but you do have more experience and expertise than your readers, and you are at least one or two steps ahead of them in the learning curve. You teach what you know, but are honest and admit you don’t know everything, and point your readers to experts who know more in certain subtopics whenever appropriate.
3. *The third voice is the enthusiastic amateur.* Here, you freely admit that you are a peer of the reader rather than a superior, and your writings chronicle your adventures as you progress in your mastery of the craft or subject you are writing about. It has a collegial tone of “let’s explore this great subject together!” You can find this tone

on my hobby site for aquarium hobbyists, www.aquariumdetective.com. John McPhee wrote several books on geology using this voice, because he was a reporter, not an expert.

Matters of tone

By tone, we mean: How does the writing sound? In good how-to writing, the tone should be conversational, easygoing, and natural. Your how-to writing should, in the words of a how-to writer in the personal computer field, sound like “a friendly, patient teacher looking over the reader’s shoulder.” We call this a personal or informal writing style.

Even if you are the authoritative expert, you should keep things simple and accessible. Remember, part of your job is to motivate readers into pursuing the activity, not scare them into quitting.

According to an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, here are the qualities of a personal writing style:

- Be warm.
- Use the active voice.
- Use personal pronouns.
- Use contractions.
- Write in a natural, conversational tone.
- Write in the first person and second person.
- Vary sentence length.
- Let your personality shine through.

Matters of style

What about “style”? Well, what is style? In his book *Opus 300*, Isaac Asimov notes that there are two chief aspects to any piece of writing: (1) what you say and (2) how you say it. The former is content and “the latter is style,” says Asimov.

Since the primary goal of how-to writing is to communicate information, instruction, and ideas—and not tell a story, paint word pictures, or evoke strong feeling or emotion—the best style for the how-to writer is to say what you have to say in plain, simple English. “I think most writers, even

the best, overwrite,” said Truman Capote. “I prefer to underwrite. Simple, clear as a country creek.”

A simple, unpretentious, informal, conversational style with a friendly, patient tone is ideal for how-to writing. Literary or poetic style has no place here, nor does obscurity or intellectual wordplay.

“I have an informal style, which means I tend to use short words and simple sentence structure,” says Isaac Asimov. “The informal style pleases people who enjoy the sensation of feeling that the ideas are flowing from the writer’s brain into their own without mental friction.”

The 3 C’s formula for nonfiction writing

The 3 C’s formula is for all types of nonfiction writing, not just how-to. When you follow the formula, your writing will be quick, easy, and pleasurable to read, all of which are goals you should strive for. Here is the formula:

The first C is clarity. What you write must be clear. Not just to you or the client or the marketing director or the product manager, but to the prospects you hope to sell the product to.

Ralph Waldo Emerson defines clarity this way: “It is not enough to write so that you can be understood. You must write so that you cannot be misunderstood.”

The typical advice given in writing classes about clarity is to use small words, short sentences, and short paragraphs, and this is sensible advice. Breaking long documents up into sensibly organized sections, each with its own heading, also helps.

But clear writing stems primarily from clear thinking, and the converse is also true. If you don’t really understand what you are talking about, your writing will be weak, rambling, and obtuse. On the other hand, when you understand your subject matter, know your audience, and you have a useful and important idea you want to convey, the clarity of your writing will inevitably reflect your well-thought-out idea.

The second C is concise. The key here is that concise and brief are not synonyms. “Brief” means “short.” If you want to be brief, you simply cut words until you reduce the composition to the word count desired. “Concise” means telling the complete story in the fewest possible words. It means we convey information with no rambling, no redundancy, no needless repetition, no using three words when one will do.

The third C is compelling. It is not enough that the copy is easy to read. It must be so interesting, engaging, and informative that the reader cannot put it down, or, at minimum, the reader feels compelled to at least skim the document to glean the important points.

Create systems for success for your readers

Inept how-to writers write vapid, run-on prose full of puff words. Their pages say nothing and fail to mask the fact that, for the most part, they either don't know what they are talking about or, if they do, they cannot articulate it to others.

Mediocre how-to writers at least take the time to Google the topic, read some web pages on it, and put some information into their text. Unfortunately, the information is not presented in a coherent fashion, and so it is “what” writing rather than “how” writing.

Good how-to writers not only fill their pages with valuable content, but they explain it in such a way that the readers gets valuable tips to improve his skill or results.

Great how-to writers organize the content and tips into a step-by-step system and include actionable advice that, when followed, allows the reader to begin at the beginning, progress, and achieve the objective, whether it's creating a Japanese rock garden or starting a business.

The more you can present your instructions as a system for getting something done, the more valuable your how-to writings will be to your readers. The keys to creating a good system are:

- Clear writing with a helpful, motivating attitude
- Short, bite-sized, easy-to-digest steps and sections
- Material organized according to the process the reader wants to master or the goal she wants to achieve
- Well-defined objectives and measurable milestones for each step; e.g., after step one, you will have finished X
- A goal or accomplishment the system leads you to complete.

Motivating the reader to follow your instructions

To recap: At the lowest levels of the craft, how-to writing merely conveys information. At higher levels, it teaches you a body of knowledge, a skill, a task, or a process. Even better than that, great how-to writing *motivates* the reader to learn the material.

Here is the lead of a manual on how to operate a workstation for controlling processes in plants. It is accurate but stuffy and unexciting:

Module 1: Overview

The Operator's Workstation acts as the interface between the Operator and the processes being monitored and controlled. It allows the Operator to perform his or her duties in an efficient manner.

We changed it to:

Module 1: Getting to Know Your Workstation

Your job is to monitor and control processes in your plant. Your operator's workstation can help you do that job better and faster.

I submit that the rewrite is better because it contains a benefit—a reason why the reader should make the effort to read and master the material. Remember, if your reader doesn't read and apply your how-to writing, it has done him little good. The most satisfied customers are not those who simply enjoyed the book, but those who followed the advice and got the results they desired.

Avoid content overload

Avoid what I call “content overload” or the “Google syndrome”: cramming as much information as you can find on Google into the manuscript as space allows.

In the pre-internet days, the challenge for the nonfiction writer was finding enough information to fill a book, manual, or report.

In the internet era, we have the opposite problem. We are overwhelmed with the amount of information we find on our topic. The inexperienced writer feels compelled to cram everything he finds into his manuscript. The result is an unappealing mass of wordy and pointless prose.

To write nonfiction well in the internet age, the key is selectivity. In each section of your document, have points you want to make and ideas or techniques you want to teach. Include only those facts that help prove, illustrate, or support your points. Omit everything else. Expect to research and find at least twice as much research material as you can use.

Don't fall in love with your research materials. Know when not to use something and don't be afraid to throw it away. Actually, you don't have to throw it away. You can keep it in a file for the project. Just know what to include in the actual writing and what to omit.

Why you should minimize hyperlinks, cross references, and content appendices

Some authors load their e-books with hyperlinks to websites, sales pages for other e-books on related topics, or resources that discuss a topic in more detail than is covered in the book.

This is fine, but don't overdo it. Your book or manual should be clear, simple, and complete on its own. If the reader has to click a link in every sentence to read something else, she will become annoyed and dissatisfied.

Some how-to authors love to add long appendices to their how-to books, loaded with resources and references to obtain additional content on the topic. Appendices listing resources add value to the book, but resist the temptation to pad your manuscript with these. Your book should be sufficiently meaty and thorough even with these appendices taken away.

Avoid unnecessary links for topics the reader either knows or can easily find on his own. It is unnecessary, for example, to hyperlink the word "Mars" to the Wikipedia article on Mars when writing a piece about space exploration.

Too many writers are overly concerned about selling and cross-promoting their other works in whatever info product they are writing at present. Their concern clearly is to make additional sales, and not to service the reader, and it certainly comes across that way.

I am annoyed when I hire a writer to do a book for my online publishing company and the first question he asks me is whether he can include links for products he sells (his own as well as others he sells as an affiliate). That tells me he is focused on his affiliate commission checks and not on the book he is writing or the reader he is writing it for.

You can reference your other works in your current writing project, but do so sparingly and only when it adds value for the reader. If every other sentence recommends another of the author's books and gives a hyperlink to the book's order page, the reader will quite correctly conclude that what he has bought is not education but a thinly veiled sales pitch—exactly what you do *not* want to do.

How to extend the shelf life of info products

Here is a simple trick for keeping your book current: Create a companion website to the book. On the book's title page, add a box that says: "This book will never go out of date, because new information is continually posted on the companion website"—and include the URL in the box.

Another way to promise that a book or how-to product will never go out of date is to publish a free e-newsletter on that topic. Include a free subscription to the newsletter with the purchase price, and let the readers know the newsletter brings them the latest information on the topic in a timely manner.

For print information products in loose-leaf binders, you can send periodic updates—pages with new or updated information that can be inserted into the binder. Typically with a high-priced loose-leaf information product, the updates are quarterly; the first year's updates might be free, with an annual subscription after that to continue to receive all new quarterly updates.

Quick start guides

Not all, but many of my e-books describe processes. Whenever possible, I organize the contents according to the steps in the process. Each chapter or section covers a step, and they are numbered in sequence.

Readers of how-to information like to feel they have learned something valuable within the first few minutes of reading. One way to fulfill this desire is to present a short, practical tip early in the book, often as a boxed sidebar.

Another is to print a short "quick-start guide" at the beginning of the book, after the front cover and copyright page, and before the main text starts. The quick-start guide simply indicates the steps of the process in numbered order, with a two-sentence summary of each. In my marketing, I sometimes stress the quick-start guide as a value-added feature, saying the reader can learn the gist of the process in just seven minutes reading time.

Formats and pricing

When you are writing your how-to manuscript, keep in mind the format in which your manuscript will be published. Will it be a trade paperback? This is a paperback book the same size as a hardcover book. “Mass market” paperbacks, by comparison, are the smaller paperbacks sold in supermarkets and drugstores.

The format can affect the length of your manuscript, the tone, and even the content. Traditional trade paperback books are often written in a lighter, breezier style than, say, textbooks, which are denser and more technical.

Format dictates price more so than amount of content. For example, a 200-page trade paperback contains 70,000 to 80,000 words and sells for around \$15 to \$20. By comparison, a 60-minute spoken-word audio program contains only 7,000 words or so, but sells for \$29 or more. The program gives you one-tenth the amount of information but is double the price.

Table 5.2 lists typical information product formats and their price ranges.

Table 5.2. Types of Information Products

Information Product Type	Price Range
Hardcover, professional and reference book (200-400 pages)	\$40-\$85
Trade paperback (200 pages)	\$15-\$29
E-book (200 pages)	\$9.99-\$12.99
PDF e-book* (50-100 pages)	\$19-\$59
Audio CDs	\$29-\$49 per CD
Audio MP3 downloads	25%-50% less than audio CDs
DVDs	\$39-\$79
Streaming video online	25%-50% less than DVDs
Membership site	\$29-\$79 per month
Webinars (60-90 minutes)	Free-\$179
Book content in 3-ring binder	\$49-\$179
Above binder + multiple audio CDs and/or DVDs	\$99-\$299
Online courses	\$497-\$997
Big-ticket online master class	\$1,000-\$10,000
Mentoring programs	\$1,000-\$5,000
Mastermind groups	\$2,500-\$10,000
Coaching	\$1,000-\$2,500
Clinics	\$1,000-\$2,000
Info product licensing	\$250-\$5,000
Forms kits	\$49-\$99

* See Chapter 8.