

# It's all MATERIAL

By BONNIE BUDZOWSKI

*Pen your way to productivity and results with a few simple rules of writing*

As both experts and entrepreneurs, NSA members realize that success in this field belongs to the pen as well as the platform. We demonstrate our expertise, create buzz and sell our speeches with articles, blogs, books and even proposals. Preparing these messages is time-consuming, and chances are that it's neither our first love nor our primary strength. The pressure to write, in the face of other pressing demands, can also be anxiety-producing. As a result, many professionals waste time in procrastination, perfectionism and writer's block.



Addressing issues around anxiety can be complicated, but addressing issues of productivity in communication is straightforward. The following three rules can increase the quality of your communication while reducing the time and frustration it takes to prepare a message.

***“People who develop an article or a proposal at the eleventh hour are obligated to generate and critique at the same time, to mix creation and correction like you mix salt and pepper at a meal.”***

## RULE 1 Take the perspective of a filmmaker

A predictable route to writer’s block is to sit yourself before a blank screen or page, expecting to start your project at the beginning and plow straight through to the end. Instead, try the filmmaker’s approach: work on one scene (section) at a time, anticipating an editing process that will piece the scenes together seamlessly.

Begin a communication project by warming up your mental generator, just as an actress or singer might warm up her voice before a performance. Then develop your project one segment at a time, like the filmmaker. Save the criticism for later, because premature criticism will hamper you, like a persistent tickle in your throat.

Try the following technique to warm up and identify segments for your message:

**Make a list of questions from the receivers’ perspective.** For example, if you need to prepare an article on the issues that surround finances in retirement, start by listing the questions your readers will have: How will I know how much is enough? What secrets or tricks am I missing? What are the greatest dangers to my security? What’s the real truth behind long-term care insurance? How can I minimize hassle and maximize gain for my kids? How can I reach my philanthropic goals and still have money to travel?

By identifying the questions, you established the “scenes” of your message. Next, put those scenes in a logical order, based on the receivers’ most urgent concerns. Write out the answers to the questions, and you’ve quickly produced a draft. Only then is it time to add stories, analogies, statistics, or colorful and persuasive material. Finally,

prepare an introduction to pull the reader in and build a conclusion that is powerful and directs the reader to action.

Edit your material as necessary, and you’ve produced a communication product in the style of a filmmaker—without the frustration and anxiety that typically comes with a writing project.

When your task is to write a proposal for multiple speeches, training or consulting services, warm up by listing the receivers’ priorities rather than his or her questions. To make a compelling case, you’ll need to do some research or conduct informal interviews before you make the list. The time you spend clarifying priorities and goals is a high-yield investment.

## RULE 2 Get a good night’s rest and edit in the morning

Filming and editing are completely different tasks. For maximum productivity, keep the separation distinct. In other words, take a break between writing and editing. Renowned writing teacher Peter Elbow explains it like this:

Writing calls on two skills that are so different that they usually conflict with each other: creating and criticizing. In other words, writing calls on the ability to create words and ideas out of yourself, but it also calls on the ability to criticize them in order to decide which ones to use.

Even when preparing technical manuals or medical abstracts (which most speakers don’t), we call upon a part of the brain that specializes in creating, generating and making abstract connections. While the neurology is complex, we can think of these activities as functions of the right brain. The right brain is the lyrical, visual, subjective, expansive part of the brain. It is the source of color, interest and analogy.

When generative functions are left unchecked, however, they produce messages that are sloppy and hard to understand. When you notice an analogy or story that doesn’t seem to fit with the rest of the content, this is often the problem. We need the configuring functions of the brain (referred to simplistically as the left brain) to discipline and edit the work of the right. The left brain checks for sequence; establishes connections and transitions; and deals with pesky punctuation marks. The critical functions of the left brain make our messages readable and understandable, logical and to the point.

People who develop an article or a proposal at the eleventh hour are obligated to generate and critique at the same time, to mix creation and correction like you mix salt and pepper at a meal. From a productivity standpoint, this is the least efficient way to use the resources of the brain.

# Create a Body of Work

Barbara Bartlein used to put an ad in the *Yellow Pages* and then wait for the phone to ring from customers seeking her expertise. Now she brings in buyers by putting her knowledge into words. "People believe the written word and when they see you in print; you have instant credibility and exposure," says Bartlein, who is president of Great Lakes Consulting Group, which provides keynotes, seminars and consultation for business and life balance. "Articles provide you with a body of work that can be sold in many forms," Bartlein says. She offers this advice for getting your message to the masses:

**Flood the print world.** Identify the magazines, newspapers and journals that represent the industries you serve. Study their format and content. Obtain editorial calendars, article submission requirements and deadlines. Build relationships with reporters and editors so they immediately think of you as an expert in a particular field. Offer to write a column or be an expert contributor.

**Go live.** Internet search engines love content. New postings and changes will get you higher in the searches than static pages. The easiest form of exposure is with a blog, which will direct search engines to your site based on key words and content. To create a free blog, visit [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com). Link the blog to your main site for increased traffic. And once you post articles on your blog, alert search engines that you have fresh content with a ping. For free pinging, visit [www.pingomatic.com](http://www.pingomatic.com).

**Create an e-mail newsletter.** Reuse articles in your "expert" newsletter and send it monthly to clients, audience participants and Internet sign-ups. If you don't want to create an e-mail newsletter, offer to submit articles to your client's internal/employee newsletters.

**Send articles to e-zines.** Drive visitors to your Web site by publishing articles in online magazines and newsletters or e-zines. Contact other colleagues, speakers and writers to share content. Follow specific submission guidelines, and include your URL and copyright information. Try Article Submitter Pro ([www.articlesubmitterpro.info](http://www.articlesubmitterpro.info)) and submit your articles to hundreds of sites.

**Copyright all material.** Rather than getting paid a few hundred dollars for exclusive rights to your article, reuse your material over and over again in different forms by using a copyright: "Copyright 2007 by YOUR NAME, all rights reserved." You do not need to register each item and pay a fee.

**Proofread, proofread and proofread.** If catching typos and grammatical errors isn't your thing, hire an editor who can. Check out [www.finaldraftliterary.com](http://www.finaldraftliterary.com).

For maximum productivity, write your draft on one day and critique it the next. Better yet, start the project long before it is due and go through several short rounds of creating and critiquing, with breaks in between.

## RULE 3 Divide your preparation time into equal segments

When you have no choice but to begin a communication project mere hours before it is due, work with your brain rather than against it. Here's how:

Divide whatever time you have into three equal parts:

- ▶ Use one third of your time to plan to develop questions (scenes) and gather information needed to answer them.
- ▶ Use one third of your time to write and fill out the draft, adding an opening, transitions and a conclusion. As you write, turn off your spell check. This helps you to avoid fixing things that might get deleted from the final draft.
- ▶ Devote a full one third of your time to revision, a word which means re-vision. Step back and take a hard look at the message from the receivers' perspective. From this perspective, you may delete or rearrange large chunks of material; you may reconfigure the scenes in your message. Once you've adjusted the material, it is time to do the fine work of editing. Perform this task carefully, until the transitions between scenes are seamless and the grammar and punctuation is perfect.

Dividing the project into three equal parts will produce a well-balanced message that makes the best use of your time. Remember to take a brief break between each major task to allow your brain to shift gears.

Following the rules described in this article will not change the fact that writing is hard work. On the other hand, following these rules can help you get out of the negative productivity spiral that often surrounds communication tasks. The rules can help you invest time in a focused way to produce high-impact messages. **S**

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