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Becoming a better writer

This chapter gives you some key guidelines and principles about writing which are relevant to any kind of writing task. Whatever piece of writing you try, you need to think about its purpose and decide what effect this has on your writing style. There are two key questions to ask yourself:

- What is it for? In other words, what kind of writing piece is it (it could be anything from a fantasy story to a business letter) and what do you want to say? You need to be able to use different styles for different purposes.
- Who is it for? Who are the readers for this piece of writing? You need to be able to use different styles for different audiences.

Even when we think about just one kind of writing task – a letter – the style will need to be different depending on who the letter is for (a relative? a newspaper? a friend?). When you write an article you need to think about your readers: if it is for a group of young people, for instance, you need to think about how to make it clear and interesting for them, not just about what information you want to include.

● Different styles for different purposes

Writing to inform or explain

This kind of writing is factual and the important thing is for it to be as clear as possible, whether you are explaining a situation, an activity or an interest, or providing some instructions for carrying out a task. Make sure your writing is focused and objective, clear and systematic.

Be focused and objective

Your purpose is to make the information clear to your readers, not to give them your own opinion on the subject, so stick closely to the subject and don't be tempted to add comments of your own.

Be clear and systematic

The point of an explanation is that it should be simpler and clearer than the original. Here are some techniques to help you achieve this.

- Use vocabulary that is easy to understand.
- If you are answering a directed writing question, be careful not simply to repeat chunks of the original text; instead, find simpler ways to express the same ideas so that you are genuinely explaining them.
- Use sentences that are not too long or complicated.
- Make sure your punctuation is accurate and helpful so that readers can easily see their way from one point to the next.
- Use a new paragraph for every main point that you make: start the paragraph with a 'topic sentence' to tell your reader what the paragraph will be about and use the rest of the paragraph to develop the point.

Example of informative writing

Sports injuries

Sports-related injuries occur when sportsmen and women either fail to warm up properly, over-train, use incorrect equipment or adopt a faulty technique. Injuries may also follow an accident or foul play. Injuries to soft tissues, including muscles and tendons, are very common and lead to pain and various degrees of immobility. Fortunately, many sports-related injuries can be prevented by observing a few simple measures such as warming up and cooling down properly, using the proper equipment and correct techniques.

Common sports injuries

Ankle sprain

Ankle sprain: caused by tearing the ligament fibres that support the ankle when the foot turns over onto its outer edge. An ankle sprain may occur in many different types of sport, but it is commonly associated with badminton, football, squash and tennis.

Pulled hamstring

Pulled hamstring: caused by tearing the muscle fibre at the back of the thigh as a result of overstretching. A pulled hamstring often occurs while sprinting or kicking a ball.

Torn cartilage

Torn cartilage: caused by a sudden twisting movement while the knee is bent and subject to the full weight of the body. Footballers, rugby players and skiers are particularly prone to cartilage trouble.

Tendonitis

Tendonitis: inflammation of a tendon at the back of the heel. Various causes include long-distance running shoes (wearing new running shoes, wearing running shoes that do not support the heel) and change of normal running surface.

Tenosynovitis

Tenosynovitis (inflammation of tendon linings): commonly occurs in the wrist, caused by the overuse of muscles. Any racket sport may lead participants to use a vulnerable, powerful grip, e.g. rowing and weightlifting. Contributory factors include using the wrong size handle or a faulty technique when gripping the racket, oar or bar.

Shin splints

Shin splints: caused by strained tendons or muscles in the front of the lower leg when walking or running. This results in pain around the shin area that eases off when resting. Shin splints are associated with unusual or abnormal foot posture.

Bruises

Bruises (contusions): occur when an injury causes bleeding from blood capillaries beneath the skin. This leads to discoloration under the surface. Bruises arise following a blunt blow such as a punch or kick and may appear hours, or even days after an injury.

Blisters

Blisters form on skin that has been damaged by friction or heat. Tissue fluid leaks into the affected area forming a 'bubble'. Never deliberately burst a blister as this may lead to infection. Should the blister break, cover it with a dry, non-stick dressing. Otherwise, leave a blister to heal on its own and cover with a special protective blister plaster.

This piece of informative writing is in the form of a leaflet. Points are made under clear headings. In a continuous piece of writing, such headings would not be necessary, but here they aid understanding.

Technical terms for injuries are explained in straightforward vocabulary.

Sentences tend to be short, each dealing with a single point.

Here each section is separated by a heading, but note that the colon is used to good effect to clarify.

Each paragraph begins with a topic sentence and the rest of the paragraph elaborates, giving examples to illustrate.